



Society : East Berkshire Operatic Society
 Production : Singing In The Rain
 Date : Friday 9th Nov 2018
 Venue : Wilde Theatre
 Report by : Terry Hunt

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Show Report

As always, I looked forward to my visit to the Wilde Theatre and this EBOS production of Singing In The Rain. For once, turning out on a horribly wet evening seemed rather fitting, but the warm welcome by Chairman, Natalie Hayllor (and Stuart) was most welcome. I'm sure Natalie is no pushover when it comes to Chairing the Society, but her ready smile and upbeat positivity makes her a great ambassador for EBOS.

The choice of Singing In the Rain is something of a double edged sword. It's well known, with many familiar songs; it has an appeal to all ages of theatre go-er and its familiarity may even capture the imagination of those who are not so keen on musical theatre. However, with all that comes expectations, and a production which isn't the easiest to stage.

Under the Musical Direction of Bridget Biggar, her 12 piece orchestra breezed their way fairly effortlessly through the score, with an understanding of the texture of the various musical numbers. I did feel however there was a lack cohesiveness in some introductions, taking a while to get into full flow and bring the musical together with confidence. For the most part, vocals were colourful, assured and full of character. Bridget presumably worked hard with the cast to remain true to the melody while successfully introducing overtones of humour and 'performance' where required.

Under the Direction of Lucy Seymour, there were some wonderful characterisations and plenty of enjoyable interaction. The relationship between everyone on stage appeared cohesive, be they a leading character or in supporting role. The chorus moved about confidently, with character, and reacted well to on stage events, which adds a huge amount of 'finish' to the overall performance level.

For me, where this production felt less finished, was linking scenes, which was inconsistent. Some links had brown outs, others' cross fading; some with musical play outs, others in silence, etc. I found some of the scene changes (even if there was no physical scenic 'scene change') broke the flow of the production, the energy dropped and the atmosphere went very flat. Even where performance energy levels were good, the pace of the show suffered so cast had to work that bit harder to ramp it up again. I feel this could have been resolved during early production discussions.

It may have been idea to consider the value of some scene changes. For instance, I felt it wasn't entirely necessary to have a lady walk on, in full lighting, to set the smaller bench for the park scene. Much as it's nice to have the chorus at differing levels at the end of the scene (sitting on the ground, on the bench and standing), compared with the other park bench the small one looked out of place and added very little to the proceedings. Equally, the cinema seating truck is a nice prop, but it was lumpy to move (and made an awful lot of noise being taken off on one occasion) and to then have cast standing as well as those sitting, I feel the seats didn't really add enough. It's a shame the seating couldn't have been kept in the 'storage area' up stage centre, so it could have simply been pushed downstage before the gauze dropped, perhaps? Could the Sofa have come on from the wings instead?

I have to mention one thing which I couldn't figure out. When first filming Lina with the microphone, why were the backing flats not behind her, in relation to the movie camera DSL? It made no sense to me and I could see no reason why the flats couldn't have been set running DSR to USL instead?

Overall, I very much liked the concept of Victoria Spearing's set design.

The preset 'legs' showing the back of flats, hems, old style block & tackle pulley system and a few random props/costumes certainly helped set the scene.

The multi-purpose scaffold construction was a great idea, looking like, and serving as, a practical scene/props store as well incorporating the setting for Lina. The use of the gauze for projections worked very well too.

The slow and calm scene changes going on in the background, using free standing flats, the staircase, red House Tab or furniture were rarely distracting and mostly helped with the flow from scene to scene. The main issue I had with the whole concept is that we never really got a feel for any of the glamour of the era, from the settings. The red carpet scene gave a hint of it, however having the back of flats and the relative untidiness of a storage space always in view gave the feeling we were always 'on set', or backstage.

Perhaps one solution would have been to have the 'leg's painted in an art deco style on the front, and rigging them so they are able to rotate or unfold for when viewing the auditorium, a theatre or cinema, for instance?

Overall though, it was a good job by Victoria and team finding solutions to some general staging difficulties.

The lighting, as designed by Michael Brinkley and operated by Steve Davies, didn't rely too much on gimmickry, which I felt was wholly appropriate for this production. All too often I find it's forgotten that the primary purpose of LX this to enhance what is already on stage rather be a 'light show' (there are exceptions of course). However, throughout this production, the set and cast were lit sensitively, with warm, simpler washes used where appropriate, saving the more colourful and imaginative LX for when needed, such as *You Were Meant For Me*.

During the recording of the voice over, when everyone was looking out to the audience as if watching the screen, I felt a lower general state with a flickering effect with a 'projector light' from somewhere U/S centre, would have added a little atmosphere and poignancy to that scene, with Don/Kathy in soft pools of light.

One thing which completely escaped my notice for some reason, was the use of follow spots. The period of silent movies was still a too bit early to be associated with the search lights evocative of the later, golden era, of Hollywood, but perhaps use of the follow spots could have been made more obvious during 'performances' to give the feel of arc lights in a theatre, rather than still feeling we're in a studio? eg. *Fit As A Fiddle*, and picking up Don/Kathy taking their curtain calls.

All that said, I did enjoy the relative unfussiness of the LX and that it did the job it is supposed to do, so well done to Michael and Steve.

The projections were a great addition, by Duncan Bruce. It's a shame they were up in the air as much as they were...presumably to avoid the cast, in which case I agree that the correct choice was made.

Perhaps the 'adoring fans' outside Graumann's Chinese Theatre could have been more centre stage with the red carpet in front of them and the photographer and Dora Bailey at the far end (SR)? This would have helped fill the gap and perhaps made for an aesthetically more cohesive look to the scene.

The different cinema settings used for the screenings were very good, and the way in which the 'movies' were added was excellently done. Credit too, to Clive Elkington, for his videography.

The Sound, as designed and operated by Tom Horrox, was well balanced, clear and appeared to be devoid of any issues at all. I wasn't aware of any mic problem or late cues. Effects were appropriate and timely...apart from PERHAPS I'm not sure all the 'splashes' were co-ordinated with the Singing In The Rain routine, but it was excellent work by Tom.

Bronywn Hodgkins and Sara Richardson are to be congratulated for their work on Wardrobe and the outstanding array of costumes. There was so much to look at, I stopped taking much notice and simply enjoyed the spectacle of it. It was great to see the outlandish plaid suits of Cosmo and Don, the elegance of Kathy, the opulence of Lina, the fabulous styling of the Girl Dancers and ALL the women in general. With so much glamour radiating from the females in the cast, the men were rather uninteresting by comparison, but if I had a point to highlight, it would be that perhaps the men sometimes get a bit forgotten? As a leading character I would have like to seen Cosmo in a better fitting dinner jacket and Rutendo Mushambi's white suit for Beautiful Girls really needed to be sharp and well fitted, but in the overall scheme of things, I am nit picking.

I'm sure Helen Prior was able to have a good root around in the EBOS props store for set dressing. Lina's dressing room was nicely kitted out and there were plenty of fairly authentic looking period props such as the mic stands, the champagne coupes (I think it wouldn't have mattered that they were empty, if they'd been carried as though they weren't!) and a suitably technical looking sounding recording unit. As with costumes, there was so much to take in, I can't say anything stood out as being wrong, so well done to Helen for managing to provide everything from what I expect was a very comprehensive shopping list!

Hats off to Melinda Bennett for some excellent choreography...not to mention some of the cast for rising to the challenge!! The timing, intricacy and technical elements of numbers such as Fit As A Fiddle, Make 'em Laugh and Moses Supposes was spot on and I commend all concerned for the work they put in, as it clearly paid off.

All bigger dance routines were equally well performed and it was nice to see everyone with good posture throughout, the girls in particular, who were perfectly feminine in their demeanour. The tap routines were pretty much in unison for all tap numbers but at times there could have been a bit more attention to arm placement to keep it uniform, but otherwise the styling, energy and overall performance was excellent.

I know Singing In The Rain is known for its tap routines, but there were a couple of times I felt 'soft shoe' would have worked as well, which would have eliminated having to tolerate the sound of the taps during dialogue before the song started. I was only conscious of it a few times throughout the show, but I think (apologies if have got this wrong) Good Morning was one such number.

I particularly enjoyed the dance break in You Were Meant For Me.

This may be controversial, but the Singing In The Rain routine didn't really work for me because of the lack of rain. I fully appreciate why there was no water used, but that's really what makes this number, so trying to recreate it with the splashing about, jumping on and off the curb etc felt like a disappointing half measure. Whereas I enjoyed the nod to the well known elements of some routines (ie the coats and sofa in Good Morning), I can't help but wonder if Singing In The Rain may have been better completely reworked. Perhaps starting with a lovestruck Dan swinging about on a lamppost, but building to a grand, company, end of act one, finale? Well done, however, to Gordon (and the rest of the company) for some impressive umbrellography!

Gordon Cowell looked the part as the clean cut, idol of the silent screen, with a good accent and a gently endearing speaking tone. Of course, Don is a nice guy and that was certainly apparent in

Gordon's portrayal, but I felt his ego was missing. Don sometimes came across as a bit too humble. In both his vocal and dancing, although competent in both, I felt Gordon's solo performances were a little 'safe'. However, when partnered with Matt Thompson as Cosmo Brown, the game was raised! It was an excellent pairing. I ADORED, the pace and timing of the clearly well rehearsed dance sequences, especially Fit As A Fiddle, Good Morning and Moses Supposes.

Matt was well suited and confident in the role of Cosmo, bringing energy and enthusiasm whenever on stage. Although a team effort and well staged/choreographed, Matt should be commended for his performance in Make 'em Laugh and still being able to sing at the end! Matt has a great stage awareness and is a generous performer, for instance, during the voice over scene, the performance continued but was kept small, so as not to upstage Don and Kathy. Good stagecraft! Matt could have made his comedic expression a little 'bigger' in dialogue, but all in all a very enjoyable, solid and assured performance....and I'd certain not have guessed that Matt had never tapped before.

I haven't forgotten the part played by Emma Carver, as Kathy Seldon, in Good Morning, who gave an equally enjoyable performance in the routine. Emma's appearance was spot on, with a natural elegance and beauty. Emma slotted in well with Matt and Gordon, keeping the performance mostly understated required for Kathy, but adding enough vitality when needed. Emma danced and sang her way through the show with seeming effortlessness. Only the 'audition' rendition of You Are My Lucky Star need a bit more performance to try and convey how Kathy was feeling in that moment, despite singing beautifully.

Well done for hitting the bulls-eye with the 'cake' in Lina's face. Worked perfectly.

Playing a comedy role well is always going to make for a memorable performance, and Megan West screeching her way through the show as Lina Lamont, like nails down a blackboard, was no exception. Megan looked a million dollars with hair and make up to match some striking costumes. The timing and understanding of Megan's line delivery was excellent, with every single line, be it spoken, or sung horrendously well, was given the correct inference and intonation. Even during the pauses, it was like you could hear the cogs whirring in Lina's head before she'd come out with some priceless quote. 'Dignity my arse'. A beautifully accomplished performance!

Andrew Few draws attention because of being a big chap whose physicality can be surprisingly fluid. As the cigar smoking studio boss, RF Simpson, Andrew easily commanded the respect (..or is it fear?) of studio employees, but line pick up needed to be a bit quicker at times.

Dexter may not be the most significant character in the production, but Duncan Hamilton, made an impression with great comedic timing, and does great lines in exasperation and smarm.

Hannah Pike was appropriately gushy and enthusiastic as the gossiping announcer, with a good accent, but care was needed with diction as some lines got a little lost.

Welcome to the stage Robert Parton. Line delivery was clear and well articulated, but Robert's character was inconsistent in that there was a big difference in animation when not speaking or part of the action, however I'm sure experience will help Robert to find that balance.

Well done to Rutendo Mushambi for smooching his way through the moves of the nicely sung, Beautiful Girls. As previously mentioned, I'd like to have seen his suit much sharper!

An unexpected highlight of the evening for me was Thomas Harris as the Male Vocal Coach. Totally believable as an eccentric voice specialist, with bags loads of character and expression, which even carried through to the way he crawled on the floor. An excellent partnership with Matt and Gordon for Moses Supposes. Perfect timing from all 3 performers in a fast and pacey routine.

I can't deny that the adorable Adam Cox and Timothy Brennan were also an absolute joy to watch. The performance value from their beaming smiles and the fantastic dancing from both boys throughout the performance, was immeasurable. I was genuinely impressed at their achievement, especially with their confidence in the finale.

There was plenty to enjoy in this production of *Singing In The Rain*, with some excellent performances, fabulous costumes, imaginative settings wonderful music and well rehearsed dancing. Perhaps in such a fast moving/multi-scene production as this, it may be worthwhile appointing an assistant director who will look at the technical or practical elements of the staging so potential pitfalls can be ironed out along the way.

Thank you to EBOS for another another very enjoyable evening of entertainment.

Terry Hunt