

GUYS AND DOLLS
ST. AUSTELL AMATEUR OPERATIC SOCIETY
Director: Kathy West
Musical Director: Nick Long
Choreographer: Jess Madeley
As seen by Oriel Bennett on Wednesday 10th April 2024
at the The Keay Theatre, St. Austell

Any observation made by the reviewer can only be based on what she sees at the performance viewed. Any criticisms expressed may not have been valid at other performances, and are only made to encourage self reflection leading to higher standards in Amateur Theatre. It is hoped that the audience's appreciation of your efforts will have given everyone a lift and motivated you to greater

What can I say about this musical that hasn't already been said during its 70+ year history? Hugely successful, with countless nominations and awards to its credit, it has been revived a great many times on the professional stage and who knows in how many community performances. It offers so many songs that have become part of the tapestry of our memories for those of a certain age and has been immortalised on film for all generations. For years amateur societies have enjoyed presenting it because of the flexible size of the cast and the opportunities for some great leading roles both male and female and St Austell AOS has decided to stage this classic musical after a number of years when contemporary shows have been favoured. Naturally enough it attracted enthusiastic audiences eager to spend an evening away from home watching what proved to be a first class production.

It has been my style to take the elements of a stage performance in turn, partly to give each aspect of the show due consideration but also so that each department knows where to find comments on its own contribution to the overall offering. This format, used by various international adjudication systems, is a method that is tried and tested and, as they say, "If it ain't broke, don't fix it". However, a NODA review is not an adjudication or formal judgement against a set of criteria, and recent feedback I have received about my reviews indicates that I need to be "enthusiastic, sound interested and try to create a whole piece of writing not just copy out [my] notes"! so I have started to use a less formal presentation. Let me tell you I have no problem with being enthusiastic about this *Guys and Dolls*! We have come to have great expectations of this award winning society, and I for one was not disappointed.

From the moment the welcoming American voiceover began, with its tongue-in-cheek instructions about exits, 'phones and photography, we could tell we were in for a treat. I'm sure we never used to need this announcement before theatre shows but I suppose with today's audiences, some of whom have little idea of theatre etiquette (imagining themselves in front of the television, arriving late, bringing drinks in, eating noisy sweets, and checking their mobiles, it has become necessary! Rant over.) If it can be made part of the show then those societies that manage it deserve credit for the effort.

As the opening bars of *Runyanland* began and the lighting changed on the empty set we had been looking at, the scene came to life with the characters from New York's underworld - a believable collection of individuals and groupings with stories to tell. This was achieved in ways that caught the eye with the imaginative differences they exhibited, style of movement, rate of movement, interactions friendly and less so, and movement of people using interesting techniques that I don't see anywhere else and are a direct result of this particular director's NODA training - I love to recognise the peeling, Kathy!! This intimate use of the ensemble company members continued throughout the show with their introduction into scenes where they might not have a leading role to play, but giving them the opportunity to fill out the background with their own contributions - the vagrants in the Mission, the drinkers in the Hot Box, etc. I have often written in my reports that there is someone in the audience watching 'you' all the time so to see glimpses into the private lives of the inhabitants as every cast member revealed his or her personality was fascinating. This increases the costume requirements, I'm sure, sometimes for the briefest crossover, but it's such a delight to see, for example, a nun or a Keystone Cops police officer, and these

moments undoubtedly add a richness to the overall picture. One aspect of this integration is that non-dancers need not feel at a disadvantage in the production values, or that the dancers are being prioritised. Everyone has a position in creating the world of the musical and so we observe with a keen eye - it means that little slip-ups are noticed! (by me anyway) ...if cocktail glasses containing jellified drinks are thrown around without a pretended care for spillage, we can see the surface level of the 'liquid' at an angle defying gravity! ...if a hobo drinking from a bottle of hooch doesn't actually make contact between lips and bottle we wonder how she became so demeaned! Such actions momentarily lose the conviction displayed by the majority.

As is customary now with shows that require multiple settings, the cast members also had the responsibility of performing many of the set changes, wheeling the trucks around and artistically clearing set dressing, and I can only wonder at how the complex manoeuvres are rehearsed until a few days before opening night when the pieces are delivered to the theatre. Their slick operation without collisions kept the action moving with only the shortest of delays, often in blackout, and with underscoring that gave them a time frame for the change. I found it satisfying that just as a piece arrived at its designated spot on stage, the music changed and/or the vocal for the next number began crisply. Just once I thought maybe the Hot Box truck was slightly late, but given that I know the wing space at the Keay it's a wonder that Jim Chapman's stage management team can fit everything in at all. Trucks, showing shop fronts initially, became both inside and outside the Save-A-Soul Mission or the Hot Box Club, a newsstand (with excellent faux newspapers that provided hand props for *Fugue For Tinhorns*), gave way for a telephone booth, benches, tables and matched gilded and padded chairs appeared and were removed, likewise a palm tree, with the whole backed by festoons of red, or a star cloth that twinkled appropriately in some of the scenes, and with a floor cloth painted to resemble weathered city slabs. It was a very cleverly created design from Andy Martin with the fine details he is known for - stacked dice for the legs, neon signs reminiscent of downtown New York, two noticeboards so that the Biblical quote could be corrected, flats realistically portraying broken down Cuban walls with shutters and exposed brickwork, and all lit by his own complimentary lighting plot, operated in timely fashion by Paul Pearce, always aptly enhancing the moods of the different scenes. A couple of cues stood out - impressive was the dramatic change to star cloth and green uplighters for an exotic night in *Havana* and later the crafty focusing of the audience's attention on the manhole down right while the grimness of the sewers was being surreptitiously set, complete with arches, staircases and 'heavy' pipework! The Hot Box tables had individual practical lamps, which gave a credible atmosphere to the club. And gobos and shafts of downlight also made their mark intermittently to augment the ambience.

You don't need me to list all the props that were gathered by the team. It's important that what is provided is congruent with the location and the era, in this case America in the 1930s. Suffice it to say that nothing stood out as a jarring note. The handling was effected in a fluid, comfortable way (with the exceptions referred to above) and everything appeared, from our point of view, to be in the right place at the right time. The tied bundles of 'newspapers' made realistic seats, while individual papers, if a little heavy duty, were printed to resemble their counterparts and of a material to stand being manhandled for the duration of the show, the Save-A-Soul Mission band carried fitting instruments, in particular the quintessential tambourines, and served their drinks in tin mugs, the guns looked right being given weight in their handling, and the clothing that became props was donned and removed without hitch. The clearing of the table settings at the end of the Hot Box scenes was swift and tidy with everyone knowing just what his or her role was and, later, the neat provision of a screen allowed the dice to be thrown for real without getting lost.

Congruence is also vital in the wardrobe department and the many outfits demanded by the varying roles in this show all sat comfortably with our preconceptions of the era. They fitted well and allowed for freedom of movement, and I know that isn't something to be taken for granted. Well done to all the costume team who had to work hard to alter some of them that arrived in poor condition only days before production - we would never have known. The individuality of the players in the opening scene provided variety while the different sets on display showed uniformity - the Mission band in their glowing red, the Hot Box girls in gingham or satin, the black clad waitresses and MC, and the crapshooters with wide lapels and fedoras (Nicely Nicely standing out as a more comical character), while the bright patterned shirts and colourful dresses in *Havana* instantly transported us to a Cuban carnival. Footwear was considered - loved Sky's two-tone brogues and Adelaide's marabou trimmed slippers. The hair and make up were appropriate and the wigs fitted and were in good condition, Adelaide's Marilyn Monroe blonde curls helping her character.

It is a great pleasure to be able to write that the sound was just dandy! Frank Loesser took time and trouble writing the lyrics and selecting *les mots juste* so he wanted them to be heard. So often it's necessary to note that the volume was too great or the balance was out, but thanks to the skill of James Clarke this show had it right, like Goldilocks's porridge. We could hear all voices clearly in balance with the music, which says something about the cast's diction and articulation as well as the system and its operator, and so we were able to enjoy the witticisms. Even individuals' single lines within a song were picked up promptly without missing the first syllable. The American accents sounded credible, not being overdone, (*Adelaide's Lament* a notable exception for obvious reasons) and were maintained. Let's acknowledge the effects of a voice at the other end of the telephone, and the reverb on the MC's announcement. The accurate blending of the vocals allowed every line of the several polyphonic songs to be clear and the texture of the harmonies to be appreciated. MD Nick Long had put together a talented band to accompany the singers and had obviously trained the performances with diligent rehearsals to get across the nuances of tempo changes, humour and emotions that captivated the audience. *Fugue For Tinorns* demands huge concentration from the singers, *The Oldest Established* features a barber shop-like a cappella section, and *Adelaide's Lament*, *Sue Me* and *Sit Down You're Rocking The Boat* stand out as three songs that have pronounced speed changes, all of which require scrupulous rehearsal and excellent management from the Pit on the night that was clearly in evidence.

The dance numbers added hugely to the overall impact of this production with vibrant and original choreography that impressed me in so many ways. Well rehearsed and disciplined they showed imagination and evidence of an understanding of how to create movement appropriate to the characters and the story... not always the case. In many shows a choreographer will just do a 'nice dance routine'. Jess Madeley is able to put together the natural gestures and body language of a bunch of hoodlums, gamblers and their molls, and turn them into something engrossingly watchable. And what's more she can coach performances from a cast full of mixed abilities that consequently merge almost imperceptibly. When the Hot Box's able female dancers were supplementing the numbers of crapshooters the difference between their skill and the men's movements was thoughtfully disguised by avoiding too much unison work. Armography featured, which works when everyone knows the moves and is a very slick method to involve the non-dancers successfully. I got a huge kick out of identifying stop-motion, staccato postures, precise freezes, unison work juxtaposed with individual and small groupings' work, athletics versus lyrical, safe impressive lifts, full ensemble against solo, close interpretation of the music and varied pictures and tableaux that used the levels provided by the furniture. *Sit Down You're Rocking The Boat* a case in point as Nicely Nicely cavorted around the set, and the rapid off beat canon standing and sitting was a genuine showstopper, as it should be with the reprise written into the score! I congratulate the dancers who had to present the diagonal line - notoriously difficult, and only the teeniest bit off as it rotated, and getting a kick line with Tiller Girls accuracy takes years, of course! We can believe that the downtown New York dance troupe would not need to be as perfect for their clientele! It is a fine talent to be able to choreograph a show in a unique way and not just churn out the same combinations as last year or the year before. Excellent work!

At the helm of this production, Kathy West knows what she's doing. Years of honing her skills and knowledge, and her innate talent, have given her an attentive eye for detail and the experience to coax her cast to give of their best. Her selection for the lead characters was spot on for believability and even though there had to be a gender-blind element in peopling the stage with enough crapshooters, we accepted the male mannerisms of the females. It's what 'acting' is about - if you're asked to play a man, or wear a dress, you get on with it! It's not you, it's a role. It takes time to prepare crowd scenes and we saw the effect so many times in this show, from the opening, through crap games and Mission Hall, to nightclub customers, with individuals given, or encouraged to create for themselves, back stories that could be quietly conveyed without pulling focus from the main action, which they managed extremely well showing a discipline and awareness of the value of stillness. Their reactions were natural and unforced. Leading characters had clearly been coached in holding the floor during dialogues without shuffling around and their controlled gestures avoided the flappy arms so many amateurs adopt! The show romped along at a terrific pace with words secure and cues picked up promptly by all indicating a rehearsal schedule that was suitable for purpose. Notable that the cameo roles of MC and the Dancer looking for her earring were delivered with the same energy as the leading roles. The fight scene captured my heart! I would love to have watched its genesis, which I imagine to have been workshopped. The choreography, whether Kathy's or Jess's, or a combination, was spectacular with real conviction in its execution at speed, and the diversity of punches, slaps, kicks and throws was spellbinding - it all ended too soon! Also requiring careful design was the intimacy between Sky and Sarah - the first kiss was good enough although the slap was less so, looking like a genuine slap not a knap and as if Camilla didn't want to hurt Ryan, but the second embrace came across as very real.

The two pairs of lovers were well matched with Ryan Full charismatic in the role of Sky Masterson. As well as a strong singing voice his gestures of head and hands were disciplined and considered, and sublimely fitted both the inveterate gambler and his changing emotions towards Sarah Brown. Camilla Mills in the role was sufficiently prim and dignified initially, her rounded posture indicating the lack of assurance she felt before allowing herself to accept her love. Her transformation as she experienced the effects of a Cuban Milkshake was humorously plausible and her clear youthful voice blended well with Ryan's. Their singing individually and in duet was easy on the ears.

The relationship between Nathan Detroit and Miss Adelaide provides the comedy pairing in both their story and their songs. Stefan Richards and Jess Madeley were perfectly matched so that we believed in their long standing romance, as well as Nathan's sometimes angry frustrations to get on with his gambling and hers to be wed. I applaud Jess for the enormity of her commitment to the show, not only choreography the whole thing but also taking on such a demanding leading role. Her presentation of the emotions and points of reflection ebbing and flowing in the *Lament* was stellar. Their duet allowed brash Nathan his one song that was tuneful and a surprisingly touching moment between them.

Stepping into the iconic role of Nicely Nicely with probably the most well known of the musical's songs to deliver, Jonathan Tucker was simply a delight. His facial expressions were telling without gurning or being pantomime-like and consequently the characterisation was very funny. Fabulous spirited rendition of *Sit Down...* with boundless vitality and agility.

Benny Southstreet, Harry the Horse and Rusty Charlie were a strong trio offering dedicated and loyal support to Nathan with good vocal projection, body language and commitment to their songs.

The Missionaries Arvide Abernathy and General Cartwright were beautifully cast to be completely credible in their roles. *More I Cannot Wish* You was an affectionate lull in the overall bustle of the show sung with great tenderness.

Lieutenant Branigan carried his authority well with a commanding voice and an awareness of the comical nature of his role being hoodwinked at every turn.

The Ensemble of Crapshooters, Missionary Band members, and Hot Box Girls worked so hard to populate a realistic downtown New York, changing costumes repeatedly, moving the set and props, always where they should be when they should be and with an engaging energy that fully supported the narrative, the rest of the cast and the production team.

Guys and Dolls is a great feel-good musical of the old style, rousing chorus numbers, vibrant dance routines, colourful costumes and a fairytale storyline. I am quite sure that Frank Loesser himself would have approved of this staging of his work that interpreted his intentions with clarity and provided an evening of highly enjoyable entertainment that you can clock up as another society success..

Thank you for inviting NODA to review your show. Good luck with whatever your next venture is - I look forward to seeing it in a year's time.

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