

2016 Me & My Girl

Director: Kathy West

Musical Director: Vicky Pascoe

Choreographer: Maureen Pascoe

Costumes: Dress Circle Costumiers

Scenery: Andy Martin Production Support

NOMINATED for the NODA South West Award for Best Musical Production & NODA South West Award for Outstanding Choreography.

I wonder what the founding fathers of St. Austell Amateur Operatic Society thought they were doing when they started things off in 1916: the year of Verdun and the Somme. As we commemorate these awful events we also give thanks for the brighter side of life which this society has maintained for one hundred years. To celebrate the occasion the Society chose to stage another "feel-good" show with its myriad of gags and wonderfully enjoyable melodies. Unadulterated fun and frolics with the heart-warming devotion of Bill for Sally at its centre.

The usual bright overture with the audience humming along to the familiar tunes and the clipped singing of the upper classes as they escape to the country for a riotous weekend at Harefield Hall, got the piece off to a chirpy start with immediate humour with the urchin and the Rolls Royce. Words were crisp and music tuneful in the tricky opening number. The ever inventive Andy Martin swept us up to the portal of Harefield Hall and on into the reception room with refreshments on a large table and an impressive suit of armour beside the doorway. This worked well especially as the traditional gag with the armour was sidelined in favour of a different gag.

Lord Harefield's family were introduced in a measured manner ensuring the audience knew who everyone was and Gerald quickly won over the audience with some amusing mincing and the traditional toffee-nosed voice. Speedily moving to Lady Jacqueline's first number the physical nature of some of the humour was quickly established. Each member of the family had clearly defined stereo-typical characters which were colourfully painted and maintained with the natural ease associated with the upper classes. In the centre of this were the formidable Duchess and the slightly mad solicitor. Both portrayals quickly won the audience's adulation and enabled the rest of the principal characters to make the most of their various gags.

The entrance of the new Lord came with a boost of energy and the good old jokes tumbled over themselves in quick succession. Finally the central duo was revealed with their lovable jokes about lino and net curtains. These laughs were joyously assisted by the dour Charles and his fellow servants until the title song with its tap sequence brought the opening scene to its exuberant climax.

The amusing storyline was maintained with strong scenes between Bill & Jacqui, and Bill and the Duchess with appropriate assistance from Sir John, Parchester and Gerald. Jacqui's vamp number was greatly enjoyed and the "Lady Lind" scene had a bubbly pace which really gelled. Getting the pace of these interchanges is key to the overall fizz of these scenes and Bill and the Duchess achieved this here and later in the library.

The company came into its own with the well marshalled kitchen scene and a vigorous non-traditional "Lambeth Walk". The audience was too awed by the fast routine of this famous number and too busy laughing at the Duchess's unease to join in. Following this with an extremely energetic "Sun Has Got His Hat On" the second act got off to an exhausting start. With the ensemble racing away with the tap-break, Gerald & the band amazingly kept up with the frenzy and everyone was glad of the subsequent gently amusing sequence between Sally and Sir Jasper (beautifully portrayed as a cross between Richard Hearn and Albert Einstein).

The Library Scene is central to the storyline and here Sally came into her own with a poignant reprise of the beautiful "Once You Lose Your Heart", this time without the distraction of background action. Before the audience could feel too sad, the rollicking humour was continued with help from the tiger-skin (adroitly handled by Bill) and an ensemble of tapping ghosts. The gallery scene, poking fun at Gilbert & Sullivan's "Ruddigore" where the ancestors materialise to punish the errant Lord, was rather heavily handled. With limited time "on set" to practise, this scene probably became slicker as the week progressed and the magic of the portraits coming to life was more effective. Bill performed some amusing tricks with Sir John to keep the laughs coming in the "Let's get you squiffy" scene and the "short arms" gag was worked well with Parchester maintaining an

amazingly serious demeanour.

Back in Lambeth there were some amusing moments with the Telegram-boy and the Policeman. A vigorous Mrs. Brown drove the scene along but ensured the story was clearly told. She proved a capable foil for Sir John successfully mixing the roguish humour with the contrast in the classes. A comparison also successfully demonstrated by the arrival of the Pearlies at the party before the "Lambeth Walk" Then Bill gave a lovely rendition of "Leaning on the Lamppost", with some delicate playing from the band and a pleasant dance routine. Unfortunately this scene was spoiled by some electronics remaining visible another slight snag which would be smoothed out as the performance week progressed.

The final scene was played for all its worth with the proposal gags and the two bags scoring highly. With a beautifully timed "Where the Bloody hell have you been?" set up perfectly by Sally the show ended in an excess of audience participation.

Pace and precision dropped once or twice on Opening Night, the set proved noisy to move and there was a sad lack of braces in evidence. Bill may be new to lordship but his tailors and valet would see that his trousers fitted. Hiring can be a lottery and I'm sure you're wonderful team of seamstresses had worked overtime to see that everyone looked period and posh and quick changes can scupper a good look. There are so many successful elements which one has come to expect from a presentation at St. Austell and these were well maintained but it is now time to move on and push the bar a little higher: a challenge which I am sure will be met with one of the newer shows in 2017. The overall fun of this frothy show was presented to an enthusiastic audience with the usual enjoyment and it is good to watch a group which exudes such obvious enjoyment and togetherness.

The challenges of the Keay and this frivolous eccentricity were happily presented appropriately celebrating one hundred years. Here's to the next one hundred.

Nick Lawrence
NODA South West Regional Councillor