

2014 Half a Sixpence (new version)

Director: Kathy West

Musical Director: Hannah Hawken

Choreographer: Maureen Pascoe

Costumes: Triple C's Costumes Theatrical Hire

Scenery: Andy Martin Production Support

Venue: The Keay, St Austell

WINNERS of the NODA South West Haslemere Award for Visual Excellence for Half a Sixpence (2014)

When someone takes a well-loved treasure and alters it, one can never be sure what the results will be. To add to a successful score numbers which were cut from the original can be dodgy – one has to ask: “Why were they cut in the first place?” To mess with a tightly written libretto – written by a master of the art – can lead to disaster and disjointedness in the flow of the work. I had seen this new version on a number of occasions and had failed to be impressed.

Andy Martin's charming set opened with the shop fronts and wonderful old photos of Folkestone placing the story clearly in place and time. The spell was broken by Kipps' natural chatter with the audience making everyone feel at home, relaxed and ready to enjoy a good evening's entertainment.

The set moved easily by the cast, smoothly and quickly created the many and varied scenes and the Director ensured that this was kept in keeping with the rest of the show and that characters were maintained throughout. This was a major bonus, keeping the show's overall pace and never letting the audience's attention wander. The well thought out design ensure that there was never anything surplus to requirements taking up the limited space and giving the actors maximum room to perform. The colour scheme was most suitable for the period and helped maintain the air of faded elegance so essential to the feel of this show. The alley outside the stage door worked beautifully reminding one of many such lanes in and around our old theatres, and made the inside/outside the pub sequences slick and natural. The sea-front was effectively created: just how we remember those Sussex esplanades. The three trucks were well positioned and provided small and large spaces as appropriate to the scene.

As usual the set benefited from excellent lighting design by the same designer. This is always a bonus ensuring that shading, colours and atmosphere is heightened and the actors fit so naturally into the scenes. The coming storm at the end of Act One was beautifully handled, and the rich warmth of the Floral Hall Ballroom almost smelt of restrained perspiration.

The “pictures” were very ingenious continuing the theme of Kipps opening speech throughout the play until the flash bang wallop of the wedding scene and the final romantic conclusion. Early in the First Act these “pictures” could have benefited from being held a little longer. I appreciate that the actors want to get off for quick changes, a slug of water or reminder of what comes next, but the audience needs to clock what is going on and some of the early “pictures” were not frozen until the flash and it could cause confusion as to whether it was a technical fault. As everyone relaxed into the proceedings, frames were held longer giving the audience time to enjoy the progress of the family album. I wondered whether a shout of “hold it!” each time would have focussed these moments and reminded us how long people had to hold the pose in those days of long exposures.

Properties were well chosen and, as in other areas, limited to what was required. Shalford's Emporium which so often in other productions looks cavernous and empty had just enough in it to give it atmosphere and looked busy within the lighted area. The shop-assistants busied themselves seeming to have a lot to do and avoiding Mr. Shalford's eye. I liked how Kipps seemed to be placed where the work was, as the others tried to avoid having to do things which culminated brilliantly in the volunteer moment. You would think that after all the years Kipps had worked there he would have become wise to why it always ended up being him; but that is part of his charm.

Everyone was dressed appropriately. There was a clear distinction between the faded elegance of the Walsingham's world and the working necessities of Kipps and his friends. Some nicely judged colour co-ordination gave scenes atmosphere and the necessary characters were subtly highlighted. In the short time between the arrival of the hiring and presenting to the audience the wardrobe team had, once again, worked wonders. It is so important in a show about a draper that the clothes hang right. Much appreciated was the lack

of shiny (cheap) material although the prostitutes' uv glowing tops were slightly distracting during the scene change. The men need to be checked before being allowed out as toffs. Cravats hanging outside, waistcoats rucked and trousers caught in shoes so that laces are eye-catching do not maintain the air of easy elegance that the upper classes should exude. Pleasing was the lack of fidgeting with skirts and hair which can often take away the desired naturalness: barely a skirt grabbed.

As expected at St. Austell make-up, hair and wigs were well conceived and worked. Everyone looked "normal" with no exaggeration and yet appropriately in period – even down to Ann Boleyn's wig. It was so good not to be aware of hair & looks but feel totally "at home" and in the moment.

The score to this new version can only be described as interesting. While serving Heneker's melodies well it intends to be integral to the whole and therefore presents lots of challenges. Hannah Hawken was well on top of this although positioned in a very separate area. "Life Off" is the American's new buzz-term and this show gives plenty of opportunities for demonstrating its usefulness. Only on a couple of occasions did the joins show and this was more for safety than intention. As the week progressed this would no doubt improve. The orchestration is big for such a gentle show and yet the band never overpowered the singers. The use of regular brass band players successfully brought out the seaside "oom pah" band sounds and the charming colouring of the woodwind was delightfully played. The banjo/guitar needed turning up. The Musical Director showed excellent control over proceedings and clearly enjoyed the trust of the performers.

Singing was generally appropriately charming. There were some good harmonies presented with the parts clearly defined, the crunchy chords enjoyed and the 'big' numbers energized. The balance between voices was generally very good. It was good to be able to hear most of the words especially as there are some good gags hidden in the lyrics. It was the first time that I had been able to decipher the words of the Cricket Match which turned out to be most amusing. The concentration on good articulation ensured that the story continued through the songs ensuring they remained an integral part of the storytelling.

As expected choreography was seamlessly added to the direction and music. As usual Maureen saw to it that the dancing didn't start abruptly in the middle of the action but resulted from what was already happening. Choice of steps and style of routines were appropriate to the actors' abilities and shaped to maximise the space given without any sign of over crowding. Maureen & Kathy had worked well together to keep the storyline going while producing showstopping numbers.

Direction was most assured and proved how good it is to have a Director who understands drama for shows which have characters with more than two dimensions. Kathy West had made firm choices before setting to work on this piece, one of which was to keep things moving and thus to never let the audience's attention drift. This was significant in making this episodic show work. The use of the actors to change the set emphasised this and spared us from disruptive blackouts. There were some excellent personal touches particularly in the employment of ideas from the Greek Theatre Course and other Summer School Courses. The "no hangers on" policy with everyone being a character with their own individual interpretation of the movement really brightened the company scenes of which there were plenty. Attention to detail and clarity of purpose aided the direct approach of the presentation keeping the audience attentive and sympathetic. The Director had obviously read the libretto and enabled the actors to put over lines with clarity and to all play a part in the storytelling. The integration of the children without any sign of contrivance was beautifully handled. Distinction between the classes was evident in movement, posture and placing.

Nick Lawrence
NODA South West Regional Councillor