

## **Somerset Fellowship of Drama – David Beach Competition Adjudication: Thursday 19th April 2018**

### **Introduction**

Strode Theatre is a mixed arts venue, attached to Strode College, opened in 1963 and since refurbished and expanded to provide a useful performance space with seating for 343. Car parking is available close by and there is a licensed bar.

We were expected and, when collecting tickets from the Box Office were provided with a programme and a drinks voucher for use in the interval, for which thanks very much. During the Interval a member of the Society asked if any further information was required and offered to introduce me to the Director at the end of the show. So the welcome was, as it should be, warm without being pushy.

Please accept this adjudication as constructive criticism: I have no wish to hurt or unjustly criticise.

### **Choice of Show**

The show is based upon the well known Barry Manilow song, expanded into a TV film, starring BM, in 1985 and then further re-inforced by a stronger story-line by Bruce Sussman and Jack Feldman and the addition of new songs. It's still a pretty weak story but it is full of good tunes and, in the right hands, is guaranteed to leave an audience feeling good

In order to mount the show you need a team of better than average dancers, preferably of both sexes, and some strong principal singers. This is, therefore, a good choice of show for a Society that has links with the College and local dance studios.

### **Auditorium Pre-set & Welcome**

As one would expect from a purpose-built theatre the view of the stage was good and un-interrupted. Tabs were open and there were speakers at high level on both sides of the stage. The stage was thrust into the space normally used by the orchestra. Sound and light were controlled from the back of the auditorium and there were lanterns hung on vertical bars at the sides and spotlights and a monitor link to the MD on the balcony. We found our way to our seats and the theatre looked almost full which improved the atmosphere.

The A4 programme was printed in full colour on glossy paper and contains a lot of information about cast and technicians. It was good to see the mention for the David Beach awards in the programme. The Society is well supported by local business advertising which must meet the printing costs and, probably, shows a welcome profit.

Because of the thrust stage, The orchestra were housed underneath and behind the central rostrum but partially in view of the audience. This did not interfere with the sound balance but, especially when the bar was moved for Act 2, I found the view of them distracting at times. I would have preferred not to see them at all, just enjoy the sound they were making.

### **Direction and movement**

The direction of the show by Laura Grace and Will Taylor was well thought out. There is a requirement for better than average dancers and they achieved this with a small troupe of athletic and attractive girls who caught the eye even when the whole cast was on stage. Strictly, Dancing Fool is for male dancers but, accepting that these were not available, good use was made of the girls with a nice tap-dance sequence. Well done to dance captain Harriet Durston.

There was good pace generally with some quite intricate choreography which was not especially original but there was a bustling atmosphere. When the entire cast was dancing the choreography was simple but well performed. There were odd moments when the pace sagged a bit: I found *Who needs to dream* and *This can't be real* a bit flat at times, but this was remedied by the energy and enthusiasm in the big dance numbers. I particularly enjoyed the opening and closing numbers and the *El Bravo* ballet. Well done to choreographer Sarah Neale. There were some impressive stage pictures and good ensemble playing. Congratulations on making what could be a very difficult show to produce, look easy.

## **Set Design**

Set design was based around a video wall. There was a central rostrum with safety barriers which was used well and effectively, providing high level entrances on both sides of the stage. Behind the rostrum was a full height video screen and video was also projected onto the front walls of the proscenium arch. The video used was very professionally produced, as far as I can tell from the programme, by the joint Directors in conjunction with the professional lighting team. Congratulations to The Creative Team for producing such a professional result, incorporating video clips of cast members as well as transporting us 1300 miles south to Havana. Whilst I am impressed by the end result I found it, at times, distracting: for example the very busy hearts cascading up the video wall distracted from the drama of *This can't be real*. For me maybe less would, at times, have been more. However the removal of the need for physical scene changes probably made up for this small quibble.

## **Stage Management**

Because scene changes were largely achieved through video, there was little need for a stage crew but what they had to do was done well and unobtrusively

## **Sound**

The orchestra was well balanced with the singers and I could hear most of the words. I imagine there were some microphones on the stage to amplify the tap sound and this sounded very good. Head mikes were well used with good fading. Good work by the professional team from bright\* (production services).

## **Props**

These were very good and well handled. All were in keeping with the production. Finding all those suitcases for *Just Arrived* must have been time consuming for Mo and Andy Pickford. However Champagne must produce a mousse when poured and sparkle thereafter. I'm sorry I noticed that yours was distinctly flat!

## **Musical Direction**

The orchestra was outstanding: I recognise many names amongst the players. The balance was spot on and never drowned the singers. Singing and dancing strenuously at the same time is not easy and I felt that the cast delivered very well. Both principals and chorus produced an excellent sound. Congratulations to Luke Holman for putting it all together.

## **Lighting**

Lighting was hung well within the auditorium and over the stage and produced some good effects. Because the look of the show relied so heavily on technical wizardry with the video wall, the other lighting took second place but I did not notice any problems so well done to the professional team led by Chris Sealy.

## **Costume**

The costumes were excellent and really added to the look of the show. I didn't count the number of changes but there were many and they all looked superb from the multi colours in Just Arrived to the black and white in Rico's Entrance and the piratical costumes in El Bravo. Well done Di Gifford and team for sourcing and making such a diverse collection.

## **Hair and Make-up**

These were all appropriate and enhanced the actors. Well done to all involved

## **Individual Performances:**

### **James Newton – Stephen/Tony**

You have a really pleasant singing voice, easy to listen to, and you delivered your numbers well. However at times I found your acting less convincing. At times you looked nervous as if you weren't sure of yourself. Perhaps a little more relaxation would improve your performance.

### **Jess Russell – Samantha/Lola**

An excellent singing voice both solo and ensemble and you raised a smile from me with your audition antics. Excellent

### **Matt Turner – Sam/Dad**

Your performance improved as the show developed and by the scene in the Apartment you were on fine form. You have a strong voice and stage presence and Who am I kidding was especially well performed.

### **Elsbeth Salmon – Gladys/Mom**

A great comedic role for you and you delivered well. Occasionally I lost your words but your singing voice was spot on for this part – a touch of the Ethel Merman?

### **Anna Gifford – Conchita**

Your professional training showed well and you brought a touch of pathos to the part of the faded performer. Ay Caramba showcased your singing and dancing talent and you acted well. Very Good

### **Matthew Maisey – Rico**

A good convincing performance that ticked all the singing, acting and dancing boxes. You brought out the sinister nature of your character and sang well.

## **Remainder of the Company!**

This is a large cast and I don't propose to name you all individually but it was a wonderful evening thanks to the spectacle provided by so many people on stage enjoying themselves and some excellent singing. You all played your parts well and looked good and I hope that you all had as much fun as the audience. However I would caution some of you about lack of smiles. Sometimes in the complicated routines some of you forgot to smile and this affects the audience enjoyment. However this show involves a lot of dancing and, my goodness, you certainly delivered. You made

a good sound avoiding the “shoutiness” that sometimes accompanies big choral numbers and this was a most enjoyable evening that sent us all out of the theatre with smiles on our faces.

I was really glad to be invited to adjudicate on this show and look forward to seeing many of you performing again in the future.

Well done to all of you.

**Chris Bailward**