

Somerset Fellowship of Drama – David Beach Competition

Friday April 11th 2019

Introduction

This is the first adjudication that I have written for the society, my umpteenth visit to the Strode Theatre, my fourth attendance at a production of The Addams Family and my third adjudication of this show for SFoD in recent years.

What is an adjudication of an amateur production?

It is difficult to define exactly and is certainly not an exact science.

Of course, there is a degree of contrasting and comparing but rarely if ever do we get the chance to be able to do this with like-for-like productions.

Unusually – if not uniquely, for me – I would like to make the following comments about my inevitable approach to this production:

The level of professional input into this production was very significant – and it showed.

You must have all been delighted with the final result and I am sure that the plaudits from your patrons must have left you feeling that this was one of – if not the – best shows you have ever presented.

I enjoyed this production immensely for the professional show that it was, and I would like to be amongst those congratulating you for providing a West End show at West Country prices!

I'm not saying it was perfect in every detail.... but it was pretty darned close.

The mantra of the SFoD is to help support and promote amateur theatre in the county and to provide a framework of categories with awards to recognise amateur excellence.

Please accept that I fully recognise the amazing amateur input lavished on the production ranging from superb performances to the home-grown production values in evidence.

As you may be aware – or may guess – adjudicators assess productions within the various segments or categories based on the achievements that are in evidence and there is a scoring system within these categories to give an overall score for any production.

Pretty much the show with the highest score wins Best Show. It's not rocket science.

However, we endeavour to compare like-with-like and try to put groups on a level playing field irrespective of their budgets and theatrical facilities available recognising the levels of amateur achievement within their parameters.

Nearly always, performances are, of course, amateurs but certainly in terms of perceived budgets and declared professional input, things vary considerably.

I am sure you will understand that where a significant amount of professional input is in evidence, whilst it hugely (generally) enhances the audience experience including that of the adjudicator, it must be recognised that these productions rarely win Best Show because an allowance is always made to adjust for this input. By that I mean you may employ the very best professional director and end up with an amazingly directed show – and still not win best show in a competition that is to recognise the amateur aspect of productions.

I know this is a very long-winded way of trying to manage expectations but please accept these comments in the context of me saying that I thought your show was outstanding.

Choice of Show

On the face of it – this shows has a reasonable number of principal roles and a significantly large ensemble of ancestors to keep a company with that sort of balance of principal players and ensemble players busy enough. It is relatively new on the block and has a great book and a tuneful and exciting score making it a great choice for amateur groups – if they can rise to the challenges that the show presents in abundance.

In retrospect this was a brilliant choice for this group particularly because of the design of the whole production being in the hands of Andrew Wright who almost turned this into a production with no ensemble but instead presenting everyone very much as an individual, challenging them all and giving us a company of amazing supporting roles rather than anything that could be described as a chorus.

Some programmes give a bit of a biography and theatrical CV of the principal players – and sometimes of the entire company. I knew nothing about any of your performers beforehand and know nothing of their experience in other shows. For me, I saw just characters, which is something I can rarely say as one tends to see the same faces appearing not only year after year with a group – but also the faces of those who move around the county just for parts. Perhaps this means that most – if not all – of your company are GSMCS members through and through as I didn't recognise them – if that is the case – fantastic – and confirming that this was an amazingly appropriate show for this group.

Auditorium Pre-set & Welcome

We were welcomed by the box office staff and your producer Mary, given our programme and offered drinks for the interval. There is always a good buzz at Strode which probably comes from the fact that the bar area is small, and I am sure because everyone was looking forward to seeing the show. We took our seats early and I thought the ruched voile drapes were perfectly lit to give a slightly spooky feel with the LED stage lights shining through creating a moonlight ambience.

At first, I was unsure about the writing on the gravestones in that it was clearly not intended to represent sculpted lettering – but of course once the set was revealed with its deliberately cartoon feel, it all tied in perfectly and I think the whole pre-set was intriguing.

Of course most of the audience – myself included – pondered the miniature house – is it a dolls house for Wednesday – does it represent the Addams ancestral home???.....or what?

I am sure no-one would have anticipated the delightful and tantalising use of the house openings with the clicking fingers which was a great opening followed by the homage to the Gale's farmhouse in the twister in the Wizard of Oz – intended or otherwise!

Direction & Choreography

In Andrew Wright you have, of course, much more than a director/choreographer.

You also have a designer with foresight and imagination – someone with the ability to inspire and who can instil confidence in people ... and someone who is clearly able to nurture – not push – the company – including those backstage – to surprise themselves by producing work that is at the top of their personal range. Perhaps one should expect the direction and choreography to be good from someone with such a vast pedigree. And it was. And so, I would like to simply point out the things that struck me as being impressive and certainly justified this allocation of budget – and that made this production stand out from the pack.

The ancestors were fully – in every sense of the word – integrated into the production and became absolutely integral to the design and action. The ancestors were not only costumed to reflect individuality but had their own movements and demeanours that truly made them watchable as full characters. They had focus and motivation at all times and as one example of many where the ancestors absolutely completed the scene, the Happy Sad song surrounded by ancestors who were engaged in every moment – then repositioned – then stood to dance a balletic sequence turned a simple duet into a beautifully crafted vignette.

This is one example of many such moments using the ancestors.

The transitions between scenes – often involving complex coffinography (a contender for a new word in the Oxford English Dictionary for 2019 perhaps?) – was the epitome of modern theatre. No Blackouts. No moving of cumbersome furniture or trucks unnecessarily.

The use of representation rather than the actual - negating again the need for producing traditional scenery – the flown picture frames for example.

The theatrical magic that was created so many times with things and people seemingly appearing out of nowhere by use of clever distraction techniques and of course lighting.

For example, Fester producing the banjo ukulele whilst turning and Lucas appearing in Happy Sad and how Mrs B appeared in the second part of Crazier than You. Pugsley coming out of the coffin – all of these were magical moments created by excellent direction – and are just a selection of those on offer.

The positioning of all the downstage actors to always ensure the sightlines from the far right and far left seats in the auditorium were not blocked.

The constant use of the coffins to represent other staging situations.

The use of the pit for the dungeon entrance.

The careful definition of the characterisations and the notable differences between the Addams' and the Beinekes.

Every song had a definite and conclusive ending – strong positioning which invited applause.

The choreography was not simple – but was clearly within the abilities of the company and although there were occasions when dancers were fronting some songs the entire company dancing was very impressive. It was notable how the company had not just learnt the steps but had mastered the choreographic intention making the dancing not just impressive but also extremely engaging – two very different things. Just as there are only eight notes in the octave there are also only so many moves, but in this show's choreography the repetition of moves or poses was absolutely minimal, and I am sure would not be noticed by your average audience member. The range of musical styles and hence choreographic styles was significant and even for example moments like the flamenco style **walk** which Morticia had to master where the body has to lead, momentary as it was, was in itself impressive.

The choreographic softness and emotion within the balletic sequences was really beautiful and the great strength in the opening number and so many subsequent songs was really impressive.

If I was an adjudicator who felt he was expected to notice – and perhaps comment on – everything, I might say that whilst I liked the slow-motion arrow from the cross-bow I think that Wednesday should have pulled the string back before firing it?

But I'm not - so I won't mention it.

It was great to see Gomez and Morticia enjoying a proper kiss and to see Fester finally embarking on his voyage to the moon.... and the ancestors finally being able to return to their resting places...although there was uncertainty from the audience as they bowed out one-by-one as to whether this was a goodbye to us as well ... and if this constituted a form of curtain call and was calling for applause? A few audience members thought so.

This was a remarkable production with a clear design vision which was executed very well indeed.

I am sure that without Anna Gifford and Marie Salter this production would have never been able to retain the intention and integrity of the director and so they should – and I am sure have been – thanked and congratulated for a huge job very well done.

Amazing teamwork.

Set Design and Construction

This was a simplistic – although not simple – design with the somewhat cartoon headstones and a New York skyline depicted in black, white and grey providing a permanent single set with a large number of additional props and set pieces to depict alternative locations.

The flown pictures and the “A” gates with their edges in LED strip lights were all really effective and worked well with the changing colours to match the mood or locations.

The coffins were an inspired idea and worked so well as multi-use pieces of set from the trees in Central Park to the long table in the house – the bed to the dungeon torture paraphernalia.

The idea in the dungeon of, again, representing, was ingenious and perfectly good.

The use of ropes and ancestors instead of building a form of electric chair as suggested was brilliant. It shows a designer who knows that all shows – well the majority anyway – are written for the professional stage and professional budgets and full-time scenery makers!

In the amateur theatre one has to be more imaginative and come up with ideas that suit an amateur budget – and limited time resources! Here we had exactly that. Inspired.

Stage Management

In this production much of the usual function of a stage crew – the coffinography for example – was undertaken (no pun intended!) by the cast which they did with great efficiency.

Just as it would be in the professional production.

There were however many pieces of set and props that needed to be ready to come on and no doubt things were as hectic back stage here as in most productions.

From an audience point of view this was an extremely slick show with no pauses and the entire backstage team should be congratulated on contributing to the high standards of this show.

Props

There were many props in this show and often it is not easy to know if things like Grandma’s trolley come under Set or Props.

In any event there were many hand props from the assassinated chicken to the cross-bow, the heavily and impressively laden trolley of potions and bits-and-pieces, the chalice and candelabras, the white umbrellas and royal blue solar-system cloth, the three birds with detachable heads!, the tulips, Fester’s sonic back-pack to name just a few.

Props give actors the opportunity for business and often most of our audiences don’t really appreciate – or at least they don’t really notice – the huge array of props that have to be acquired and sorted every night to ensure they are in the right place at the right time.

It doesn’t surprise me that there are three stalwarts looking after this department and there wasn’t anything that seemed inappropriate or incorrect to me with some very authentic props which all worked really well. A special mention to whoever made the mini-Fester for the final scene which was delightful and for finding the rats on wheels which were great fun. If someone made these – amazing!

Sound

This was another area with professional input which was very well handled.

Sometimes employing professional sound doesn't mean that it's all going to be perfect as of course the technicians always have very little rehearsal in comparison with the rest of us and it's a very difficult job! Here, I was very happy that the sound levels were absolutely right meaning we could hear pretty much every word without the feeling that the voices were artificially amplified. One only became really aware of the use of a sound system when the occasional words came from an actor entering on stage and speaking before the mic was live.

It is not always the sound engineer who is accountable for these issues of course.

The balance when speaking over underscoring and the balance of singers and the pit was again very well judged and whilst I often think of sound issues during an evening's performance – on this occasion, I hardly did – which is a good sign!

Very well done.

Lighting

Another area of professional input in the very capable hands of Chris Sealy and his team of assistants. The design here was nothing short of brilliant.

The use of colour has been revolutionised with the LED lights available nowadays with gels often only being used for intense colourwashes. The LED lights at Strode enable great colourwashes in so many different colours which aid the action – eg the change between red and blue for the moments when Gomez breaks the fourth wall.

The main LED lights were in constant use giving real atmosphere to the scenes which was most impressive – for example in the dungeon. The ever-changing moon was always beautifully lit and made a super central focus to the set.

The gate and picture frame edges with the LED strips were changed on cue with such precision each time and this accurate cueing of lighting state changes can make or break a sequence, and, in this production, they really matched the style of the show – snappy!

It was great how the green low-level profile lights enhanced the spooky atmosphere and the vertical short lighting bars in the wings and on the apron stage really enabled the uplighting and cross lighting to be effective. The row of birdies on the front of the stage were used effectively especially at the start of the show and the beam splitter gobos used a couple of times created lovely effects to give these sequences a really magical effect.

There were spotlights in use including the down lighter specials which again enhanced particular moments – some with Lurch which were really effective.

The final TNT strobe lighting sequence was a great end to a really effective and well-executed lighting plot. Very well done.

Costume

With a very small number of hired costumes the vast majority of the costumes were sourced through the society and what an amazing array of impressive costumes they were.

The principal family characters were all spot on giving the audience exactly what they would expect from the Addams family. The ancestors are all open to interpretation to a degree and without doubt the range and detail in the ancestor costumes made them instantly identifiable and truly individuals.

It was great that the ancestors were given such individual characterisation from the director because this made the costumes make sense rather than be just a set of random, different costumes.

The detail was very good indeed and of course in conjunction with the hair and make-up team these ancestral characters really came to life – if that's the right expression?!

Morticia's daring costume was fabulous. So often an actress wearing this type of gown is seen constantly pulling on the bodice edges to ensure they stay in place. Never once did I see this happen which must have been because Jess felt not only comfortable but also confident in the dress she was wearing, meaning it must have been fitted perfectly to give her this confidence. Gomez' suit was very well fitting and enabled him to move well. It is also important that the entire company are wearing costumes that not only fit and look right, but also ones in which they can dance without restriction and this certainly seemed the case here.

Great effort had been made to select either pale, ghostly coloured materials for the costumes of an alternative significant effort had been made to make them look ethereal.

Either way the ancestor costumes had that dusty look which was just perfect and unusually there was nothing in the entire costume plot that caught my eye as not quite right.

Well... almost nothing.

It would be ridiculous of me to mention the pull-on red tags on the back of Grandma's shoes that drew my eye...but surely I have to find something wrong with this production??!!

Hair & Make-up

Another triumphant area of achievement. The hair and wigs all looked really great – even Fester's normalisation wig! The maintenance of wigs throughout a busy show week is not an easy task either and so I expect Brenda was nagging you all to look after them! I came on the Thursday and they all looked great so well done in keeping them always show-ready.

The make-up was great. The principal makeup was spot on with Morticia's blood red lipstick and carefully contoured décolletage a bit of a distraction – as intended of course.

Fester and Pugsley were suitably ghoulishly made up with Gomez and Wednesday rightly opting for a more naturalised effect. Lurch and Grandma both had what one might

describe as rather Shakespearean make-up which always looks amazing from the circle but slightly less so from Row C. Both were brilliantly made up and very effective – but they look very different from the various different parts of the auditorium. The character make-up for the ancestors was exceptional with such amazing detail on everyone really helping to denote their characters – and often the method of their demise! – with severed head marks and gunshot wounds to name a few. Particularly notable were the jester and the butcher – but they were all great. This must have been a great challenge as well as great fun for the make-up team working on this show – a department that rarely gets the chance to get their teeth stuck into something – and that rarely gets more than a cursory mention. Very well done ladies.

Musical Direction

This was an amazing musical experience for your audience with a terrific balance between the singers, the pit and the sound engineer. The accompaniment of the singers was sympathetic, and I am sure you will not have had a single audience member complain that the orchestra was too loud. For me it was perfect. I am sure that the strength of singing performances we had would have been the result of a strong collaborative effort between the MD and the singers and whilst some singers, perhaps with less experience, were noticeably stretching themselves there was a huge amount of commitment from all of the soloists and some cracking vocal performances. The company singing was really very strong and everyone really seemed well rehearsed and confident. The timings on many of the songs are challenging but I didn't notice any false entries or weak starts on any of the company songs.

I am sure the MD must have been equally proud of the performers on stage and also the instrumentalists in the pit who sounded to me – as good they come. Fab.

Dancing

Good choreography is choreography that is interesting ...and that can be performed well.

It is no good having great steps and moves.... if the company can't do them.

Here we had choreography that you could all manage – eventually I expect as I am sure it didn't go right first time! – and that looked really impressive because it wasn't simple ...but you made it look easy. Any of you who think of yourselves not as dancers should be particularly congratulated because everyone committed to the dancing with real enthusiasm and passion and those who were involved in any of the more detailed sequences must have worked hard to execute them as cleanly as you did.

There were no looks of concentration or counting and the dancing was full of joy when it was joyful and full of emotion when it was needed. The positioning was first class and the finishing always spot-on and sharp. Very good indeed.

Individual Performances

Some really great individual performances.

Morticia Addams – Jess Russell

This was a standout performance – well... two standout performances really!

You looked beautiful and were costumed perfectly. Elegant and with such poise I marvelled at how confident you were in such a low cut dress. Thank you for not fiddling with your costume – or checking it – which must have been tempting at times.

Your delivery of dialogue was mesmerising – full of rich tones and allure – and clear as a bell.

Your execution of the dancing you were set was very good indeed and you clearly listen, practice and then perfect. All of your singing was strong and your timing and comic delivery was never forced and so came over perfectly.

A very strong and sustained performance throughout.

Gomez Addams – Matthew Maisey

You had just the right look for this character and had many of the mannerisms that one might look for if you were familiar with the TV series. This was a huge learning project and you were remarkably secure in both song and dialogue. I take my hat off to you.

For me, Gomez should have a twinkle in his eye and **relish** all the sensual aspect of his dialogue.

He should have a demeanour that tells us that he is a passionate lover ...and ever-ready!

He should have come to bed eyes that tell a story ...and he needs to show adoration of Morticia. Cara Mia shouldn't just be words – the sentiment of them should ooze from him.

This is so difficult to get right.

I didn't feel that you were able to capture these aspects of the character sufficiently to make this the perfect Gomez...great as your performance was.

For example, when you said to Morticia: "...let's go upstairs..." I didn't really believe that you wanted to. For me the required level of passion didn't shine through.

You had many opportunities to demonstrate your vocal abilities and I thought your songs were spot-on. Some big notes and difficult lyrics – always delivered with confidence and always instilling confidence in the audience that you were in complete control. Impressive.

Wednesday Addams – Lydia Stobie-Owen

For me this wasn't like a performance at all.

It was an embodiment of a character that we were allowed to observe.

There wasn't any apparent acting – it was all so unbelievably natural.

For me this was the standout performance of the night. You looked perfect. Your acting was sublime and your singing vocal exceptional. Pulled in the wrong Direction was fantastic.

Ohand you do weird very well.

Uncle Fester Addams – Matt Turner

This is potentially everyone's favourite character from the original TV series and this musical version. His storyline is so cute, and he is such a lovable character with his heart-breaking sincerity. Your costume and make-up all helped you to establish his character and your gentle rasping delivery of dialogue makes Fester very endearing. Your vocal delivery of the song was delightfully understated, and you managed the star-cloth effect very well. I expect you worried about your difficult start to the song on the Thursday evening. But I didn't – nor I suspect did anyone in the audience.

Love makes us do funny things sometimesand it was an emotional moment!

The song was really very good although Simon Cowell might have said "a bit too much production for my liking" – it's a view. Overall you should be really pleased.

I think you came out on top!

Pugsley Addams – Dougal Bradwell

What a brilliant opportunity for a young actor with some great scenes with funny dialogue and a chance for some very physical acting. You were able to demonstrate a confidence and ability beyond your young age and communicate with your audience very well.

Your scenes with significant dialogue occur mainly when there are fewer main characters on stage, so you are required to really hold an audience – which you can.

I was very impressed with your dialogue and singing and the control within your acting to keep a ridiculous character actually very believable. Very well done.

Grandma Addams – Judi Neale

This was such fun to watch. You looked great and kept up your physical portrayal really well. Your gait aided this considerably and certainly made your ageing convincing.

Very often this character – or the actress playing her – relies on make-up and a vocal tone.

You had these of course, but it was your physicality that enabled you to really nail this character. Again, your timing was impressive, and you used your face and your eyes to reinforce dialogue and thoughts. All good I say.

Lurch – Ross Baker

This was by far a more animated Lurch than I have seen before. This seemed to make the character much more part of the family which was maybe the director's intention.

You used your face much more and gave us less of the enigmatic characterisation that he is usually given. One exit was noticeably out of character with a fast walk once you had gone through the gates but were still on stage.

It is important to keep in character right into the wings.

You have to wait to the end of the show to be able to demonstrate your vocal ability which you did to the great surprise and delight of the audience.

Although the timing on the singing was a little bit out in the early part of your song you skilfully pulled it back to end on a great last note much to the delight of the audience.

Mal Beineke – Dave Bonser

This character is written just about as straight as they come. I have seen him portrayed much more as a geeky kind of man rather than the businessman that you were asked to portray.

In keeping Mal completely normal there is not a lot that you can do with him other than portray the dominant husband with a degree of naivety. You did this really well and delivered your dialogue with confidence and delivered the bland character you were portraying.

In your song *Crazier than You*, you demonstrated a good vocal range and timing but with a somewhat restrained difference between the normal Mal and the crazy Mal.

For me, I would have liked to have seen a little more of a difference between these two sides of his character – perhaps making the normal Mal even weedier?

Lucas Beineke – James Moore

A great part for a handsome young man – so a big tick there.

Your own age is perhaps a double-edged sword. You looked perfect as the young man because you are one and so your slightly excited puppy approach to this character at times is probably a very natural way of acting for you. This gives your performance sincerity and makes you very endearing and the audience are very much on your side.

So, all good.

But ...and I'm sorry that there is a but ...this excited and enthusiastic delivery, whilst perfectly in character, has a danger of losing clarity with less than perfect diction.

This of course means that we get the drift ...but maybe not all the words.

As I say a double-edged sword. You must have been delighted to have worked opposite Lydia and together you really made a great couple creating a really believable relationship.

Alice Beineke – Elspeth Salmon

Another very strong performance wringing every bit of comedy from her Miss-Mouse-Housewife-and-Mother character and contrasting it with the sensual woman underneath!

You looked absolutely perfect in your yellow dress and delivered Mrs B exactly as she should be. A great performer in song with an amazing ability to put over the song in character and hit the big notes when they count. What a woman. Keep taking the potion.

Ancestors – Hilary Quinlan, Olivia Kerton, Rahanna Griffin, Janice Holwill, Lydia Lakin, Fiona White, Annie Cave, Laura Vernoum, Sarah Neale, Sally Wood, Becky Cook, Ollie Shakesby, Cherry Lewis, Edgar Phillips, Chris Salmon, Alison Coals, Harriet Durston, Lee Butt, Matty Wilson, Brian Epps, Ross Everson.

What a bunch of old has-beens!!

Each one of these ancestral characters gave added value to this really great show.

You were all aided by your make-up and costume and of course you all have benefitted from working with a professional director which, believe me, doesn't happen very often.

Treasure it.

I was most impressed with the commitment that all the ancestors showed not only in the singing and dancing, but also in the way in which your onstage presence and focus during scenes really supported the overall performances of the principal players.

Your work in the scene transitions was fantastic and I think you should all be extremely proud not only of the show but of your personal contribution to its success.

Believe me – this show would not have been as Andrew had imagined it, without all of you.

This was first class entertainment.

Thank you all for such an amazing evening.

Unfortunately, I missed the monster under the bed as from my seat - in C7 - I couldn't see it.

I shall check under my own bed tonight to see if it's there!

Andy Marchant

Adjudicator – David Beach Awards