

ROSE BOWL AWARDS

Adjudication by Caroline Whitehead

A very entertaining show

This was the very first musical that I went to see at the age of 9. It was a performance at the Northcott Theatre in Exeter and I was spellbound by the story, by the dancing and by the brilliant songs that have been part of my life ever since. It really does have something for everyone and every song, without exception, is memorable and timeless. So, of course, it's a popular choice for amateur groups; there is a part for everyone in this show and an opportunity for many performers to have their moment in the spotlight. As a group, you have a wealth of talent in your number and we were treated to some moments of really first class performance. The songs carry the show and, unsurprisingly, this is where you put most of your efforts. There was some excellent choreography in the musical numbers and strong singing, both by soloists and the company as a whole. The trickier challenge is keeping up the pace and the interest on stage during the dialogue and there is a fair amount of this in between the musical numbers in this show. There were moments when the pace slowed and some performers just hesitated a little too long in delivering their lines. Having said that, it wasn't long before another great song came along and all was well again.

Your audience clearly enjoyed the performance and there were some real highlights, most notably the male chorus in 'Luck be a Lady' and the Hot Box Girls in 'Bushel and a Peck' and 'Take Back Your Mink'. For me, the key to this show is getting 'Sit Down, You're Rocking the Boat' right and you certainly did that – that scene was a triumph! This was a well-directed show with some really polished performances. I could have stayed for the evening's performance too!

Staging

I liked your hanging signs and the Mission truck was well used on both sides. You have a nice wide stage in the Strode Theatre and you took full advantage of this in the choreography as well as the design of the set. The Hot Box stage worked well too and all the set changes were well managed. Just make sure that you change the sets as quickly as possible to maintain the pace of the show. I was a little disappointed with the Havana set; it looked more like a day at the seaside rather than a Cuban Dive. Perhaps some moodier lighting would have helped. This is a tricky scene at the best of times because of the dependence on choreography and precise dance moves to get that fight scene looking realistic.

However, the Sewer set and lighting worked really well and this is a long scene so it's important to get it right. Lighting generally was carefully designed to support the many varied moods of the show. Once or twice performers were in the dark and I was yearning for a little more. In 'Bushel and a Peck', the chorus was in shadow when we should have been enjoying the lovely costumes. That said, some of the romantic scenes – 'I'll Know' and 'I've Never Been in Love Before' - were sensitively lit and really added to the emotion of those intimate moments.

The sound balance was really good throughout the show and well done to the operators for staying on cue. We had a good balance between the band in the pit and the Company numbers and then the sound checked down for the solos and duets. Guys and Dolls, with Nicely and Benny worked particularly well for sound and made this is a really memorable scene.

Choreography was excellent in the musical numbers – well done girls – and I saw some nice new touches to 'Luck Be a Lady' and 'Sit Down, You're Rockin' the Boat'. Everyone was totally committed to these numbers and the synchronization was first class. Also, in the duets with Nicely and Benny ('Guys and Dolls') and Sky and Sarah ('If I Were a Bell') there were some very clever moves that were well connected to the music and lyrics.

Band

Many congratulations to this talented band of musicians, well led by your Musical Director. It was a real treat to listen to these tunes so well played and with all the sensitivity that is demanded in the score. Throughout the whole show, I thought you supported the performers really well and altered the pace where required. Just occasionally, there were times when the underscore was too loud for the dialogue to come through and this meant that some of the funny lines were missed.

Sky

What a lovely voice you have, deep and rich in tone but still retaining great diction and variance in strength. And, with such lovely songs to sing, it was a joy to listen to you. You also have the more difficult gift of being able to move around in stage in character while singing. In your first real number - 'I'll Know' - I was impressed with this aspect of your performance. Musically, 'My Time of Day', was my highlight. This is a really tricky song and you did it justice. As for the all-round performance, 'Luck, Be A Lady', was the climax of the show and you carried this right the way through. Your applause after this one was particularly well-deserved. Sky is a challenge to play, I think. On the one hand he is the strong and respected bachelor, gambler and loner. And on the other, he is a man of true integrity and unnervingly romantic. No wonder that the ladies fall for him! I really liked your interpretation of the role and you delivered your performance with confidence and style.

Sarah

You gave us exactly the right personality for this role – a combination of haughty prejudice and innocent vulnerability. And you have a very sweet voice. I have sung all of your songs and I appreciate how high some of the phrases are. Like you, I have to brace myself to reach the top notes smoothly (especially in 'I'll Know'). I felt your nerves kicking in when those phrases were imminent and that was a shame. With just a little more support and a touch more confidence, you would have soared over those top notes with less effort. Also, just watch that you don't freeze on stage when you are singing solo. Sarah needs to stay in character even in those lovely songs and remain part of the scene. When you were singing in your semi-inebriated state ('If I Were a Bell') your voice was strong and natural and we saw the true potential you have as a performer. Here, you were moving around the stage with ease and managing those lyrical phrases at the same time. In, 'I've Never Been in Love Before' I could feel your apprehension return. Have the confidence with those high phrases. You have the voice to master them without fear. However, I really enjoyed your performance and you should be very pleased with it.

Adelaide

This is such a fantastic role, one can be fooled into thinking that you can't go wrong with it. But, over the years, I have seen some really tragic versions of Adelaide, so I know how difficult it is to pull off. I thought your performance of this warm and lovable character was absolutely brilliant. Good diction, great body language and expert comic timing right through the show. From your entrance at the Hot Box, you showed us all the nuances of this character and 'Adelaide's Lament' was one of the best I have seen (and I've probably seen about 20, both professional and amateur). Last year I saw the revival of Guys and Dolls at the Savoy and the brilliant Sophie Thompson played Adelaide. Yours was just as good - well done!

Nicely Nicely

This is such an eccentric character, you can do so much with it and you really worked hard to bring something new to the role. We have to love Nicely Nicely and we certainly did. Well done to bring a good Bronx accent and some delightful moves to this role. I had my eyes on you every

time you were on stage and really enjoyed your performance. You are the first to sing in the show and your strong voice set the scene for an entertaining show.

Nathan Detroit

This is a key role and you have some big relationships to develop as the show progresses. For me, some of them worked better than others. I really liked your relationship with the guys, particularly Nicely, Benny and the Crapshooters. As one of the boys, you were the most comfortable on stage. I wasn't as convinced with your relationship with Adelaide. I think I wanted you to be warmer to her, even though you were frightened of marriage. And she did give you every opportunity to engage with her! That said, your duet with Adelaide in the second act ('Sue Me') was really well delivered and there were some tender moments.

Arvide

Although you are on stage quite a bit, you don't have a great deal to do in the story until the second act when you have your solo number. 'More I Cannot Wish You' - This is such a beautiful song and you clearly enjoyed performing it. At the start it felt a bit stiff, but when you sat down with your granddaughter things improved and you relaxed into it. It's a beautiful melody with some glorious, poetic lyrics and we heard every word.

Benny, Rusty Charlie

Benny, your duet with Nicely was superb. This is the title track so it's important to get this right. Choreography was really well designed and vocally this was a flawless performance. I really liked you boys on stage together; you were totally relaxed and in character. These are the light-hearted moments and so your comic timing and physicality is critical. Well done.

Big Julie

You gave us a perfect Big Julie. It's only a cameo role but it is important as a foil to Nathan's comic lines and you delivered it with good strong gestures and carefully timed dialogue.

Company

What a joy to see such a strong male chorus! As soon as I heard the lines: "Good old reliable Nathan..." in your first company number, I knew that the show was going to be a delight. And 'Luck, Be A Lady' cemented my view that you had worked really hard to deliver some tight and tricky choreography, as well as some strong vocals. I am always apprehensive in this scene, because it does rely so much on a strong male chorus (just as it does in South Pacific) but I had no need to worry. You nailed it and clearly enjoyed it.

The Salvation Army troupe were a close knit group who had obviously worked hard to perform their numbers without a hitch. General Cartwright had just right amount of authority, with perfect diction and a command of the stage. And, ladies, those two Hot Box numbers were so good. I could have watched them over again. I have heard some audiences cry for an encore after these numbers and I was disappointed that your polite matinee audience did not. But the applause said it all. You clearly enjoyed performing them and your delight was infectious. I enjoyed all the Company numbers and the high point of 'Sit Down, You're Rockin' the Boat' was a triumph.

All in all, this was a pleasing performance of good, well-rehearsed talent from a Company that was comfortable with the show. You clearly had great fun with the musical numbers and this permeated to the audience, who I am sure had a very enjoyable afternoon. The music was first class and, apart from a few uncomfortable dialogue hitches, the production was accomplished.

I look forward to watching many more great shows from you.