

NORTH ESSEX THEATRE GUILD

SHOWCASE FESTIVAL 2015-2016

Group: Witham Operatic Workshop

Production: Half A Sixpence

Venue: Witham Public Hall

Adjudicator: Liz Mullen, with Andrew Hodgson

Date of adjudicators' visit: Wed February 17, 2016

INTRODUCTION:

It's not often these days you'd see a youthful group staging this quaint and lively musical. All too often, everyone wants to be in modern-day creations like Rent, Our House, Grease, and so on. So well done to Director, Faith Rogers, for persuading the company to tackle this once-popular show (best remembered as a vehicle for Tommy Steele).

This was a refreshed "new version" by Warner Brown of the David Heneker/Beverly Cross musical, based on H G Wells' charming novel, Kipps. As far as I can tell, it opens up the structure of the show to allow Kipps to narrate his story, as well as appearing in it.

The production had been rehearsed with such thoroughness and staged so smoothly, that Andrew and I agreed – not for the first time – that some groups based in Colchester would be well advised to travel to Witham to see the high standards achieved in other parts of the county.

FRONT OF HOUSE:

The Public Hall really is a lovely theatre, and despite its width as well as length, it always feels welcoming, and the raked seating at the rear adds theatrical ambience.

The WOW logo projected on to the sumptuous scarlet curtains all also contributes to the atmosphere.

The FoH staff were welcoming and efficient, as always, and although we couldn't give in to the temptation of the venue's nice little bar, we were grateful for the coffee and biscuits provided for us in the interval.

Mf....

SETTING & PROPS:

We realise that the group itself didn't make the highly adaptable sets, but these were an excellent choice. The huge divided sixpenny piece (which, of course, joined up and the end) provided the "frame" for a series of ingenious central flats to suggest the varied locations - from Mr Shalford's refined emporium, to the balustrade outside a ballroom, to a cricket pavilion. Loved the art nouveau wallpaper for Kipps' marital home, and all these scenes were moved smoothly and efficiently by the stage crew.

The backcloth for the seafront was perfectly in keeping for the Folkestone seaside of that period and, again, was drawn across with minimum fuss.

MUSIC & MOVEMENT:

Having a live orchestra is essential to shows like this, and Ben Firth's splendid team provided musical leadership and a well-balanced accompaniment.

The choreography really impressed us, and perhaps that's not surprising, with both the director and assistant director (Louise Lachance) being trained dancers. A really good job as done here, and the talented cast rose to all that was demanded of them. Any performers with particular gymnastic abilities were allowed to shine.

A Normal Working Day got the action off to a great start, with the eight shop boys and girls (all of them praiseworthy) almost a blur of dance and movement, involving tailor's manequins. This moved effortlessly into All In The Cause of Economy, with the four boys showcasing their skills in song and movement.

Other highlights, musically speaking, have to include Money To Burn – a powerhouse performance from the girls, boys and company - and the explosive Flash, Bang, Wallop, with its constant regroupings in front of the wedding photographer's lens. Not forgetting Kipps' angst-ridden What Should I Feel? and his wistful rendition of The One That Got Away and She's Too Far Above Me. Ann's spirited I Don't Believe A Word Of it (with the girls) and I Know What I Am, also hit their mark and, of course, everyone loves the title song!

"Mrs Walsingham" exhibited a strong and commanding voice in Finess, sung with Helen and her brother.

But there wasn't a weak moment in any of the musical numbers, so all credit goes to the company and orchestra – and of course the directing team.

LIGHTING AND SOUND:

Good work, from the tech team, as we've come to expect here. Indoor scenes, whether in a home, a ballroom, or a pretentious shop, were as seamlessly suggested as outdoor locations ranging from seaside promenade to building site.

Mf...

COSTUMES:

Some hard work had been put into choosing exactly the right colourful, authentic costumes. The full Edwardian panoply from smart shop boys and girls in their smart and flattering uniforms, to the almost aristocratic attire of the Walsingham family, was covered here. The ladies' gloves were an essential item. Helen Walsingham looked particularly exquisite in her cream lace outfit. The outrageous Chitterlow stood out with his loud socks, plus-fours, and deerstalker hat.

PERFORMANCES:

Firstly, well done to the whole chorus. It seems everyone on stage can sing, act and dance, and it's easy to spot the next tier of leading performers, making their way up the ladder of age and experience. The Cricket Match number showed off the boys' miming talents too!

KIPPS: Congratulations to Jake Collis (16) for taking on this major role and playing it with confidence, easy-going charm and emotion. Jake acts well, sings well, moves well - and played his down-at-heart, tormented moments and songs with as much skill as the upbeat numbers. I was impressed at the relaxed way in which Jake spoke his early narration over the orchestral rhythm. A personable, highly useful talent at such a young age.

ANN: Charlotte Tofts made a charming, humble and sweet-natured Ann. The role is made more interesting by the fact that their marriage almost fails under Ann's sense of unworthiness in the world of wealth. She is such a believable character, and Charlotte brought all this simple sincerity to the part. Her delivery of: "I'm not just a maid, I'm Silver Service," rightly caused a ripple of wry amusement.

HELEN WALSINGHAM: This is a character which demands poise and dignity. So, well done to Tasha Gooderham for giving us all the qualities of a rich girl with a social conscience, without making her either too condescending or a prig. Tasha wore her gowns with finesse.

MR SHALFORD: We really enjoyed Chris Tierney's mature portrayal of the bluff, humourless store owner. He took on the age and personality of the character and we believed in him from the first moment.

SID, PEARCE & BUGGINS: From their opening "freeze" pose in the shop, Max Lenoir, Charlie Smith and Harry Tunningley performed with so much sheer energy that they were a joy to watch and hear. All In The Cause Of Economy and Money To Burn were just two of their impressive and numerous song and dance turns.

KATE, VICTORIA, FLO and SHOP GIRL: We include Katie Galley in this line-up as we have been assured that she, as "Shop Girl" is the extra fourth girl in this energetic and lively quartet of female shop assistants. The opening scenes on the shop floor quickly established their talents at singing, movement and acting.

Alice Rydzik, Bella Tull and Alice Tunningley were the named characters, and the foursome had some wonderful scenes, including I Don't Believe A Word Of It (backing Ann). The girls' participation in numbers with the leading boys worked extremely well.

CHITTERLOW: Dexter Montgomery acted his diamond-patterned socks off as the over-the-top actor who announces Kipps' change of fortune. We felt that the extreme camp characterisation didn't quite fit the character, but that's not Dexter's fault. His extravagant gestures and reactions caused great amusement.

MRS WALSINGHAM: Amy Seymour used her height to good advantage, and created an imperious, though not unkind, woman of the Edwardian upper class. Mrs W simply knows her place in society and expects the lower orders to go along with it. Amy brought all this into her performance, and we were impressed by her strong singing voice in *Finesse*, with Helen and Young Walsingham.

YOUNG WALSINGHAM: Tom Nicholls was well cast in height, to match his stage mother, and carried himself with dignity. We were always aware of Young Walsingham's place in society.

DIRECTION & SUMMARY

We weren't sure that the over-camp interpretation of Chitterlow was apt, given the character's claims to have wooed several young ladies. But that aside, there was little to criticise in this engaging show.

Faith Rogers can pride herself on a thoroughly enjoyable and professional production. There was never a slack moment as scene followed scene smoothly. The whole company and stage crew can be happy that they all contributed to this impression of effortless pace. Choreography, costumes, sets and acting, all added up to success.

Company block-busters such as *Flash, Bang, Wallop* were a powerhouse of energy – a description which fitted the entire cast. Well done for a very good evening's entertainment.

Founder and President, the late Nick Clough, would have been deeply proud of this show, which was dedicated to his memory.

With thanks,

Liz Mullen

Adjudicator