

NORTH ESSEX THEATRE GUILD

SHOWCASE FESTIVAL 2016-2017

Group: Witham Operatic Workshop

Production: Loserville by Elliot Davis & James Bourne

Venue: Witham Public Hall

Adjudicator: Liz Mullen accompanied by Anne Sexton

Date of adjudicators' visit: Thursday February 16th, 2017

INTRODUCTION:

This energetic young company are an asset to their town and to the local drama scene. A company that can give young performers experience of such diverse shows as Half A Sixpence, Grease and Loserville inevitably attracts members of a high calibre – and appreciative audiences.

While Loserville probably didn't sell out, being a largely unknown piece, it still provided an enjoyable and unusual evening's entertainment. As a show co-written by a member of Busted and developed originally from a band's concept album, this geeky celebration of early computer pioneers is refreshingly different.

FRONT OF HOUSE:

The friendly and instant welcome is a hallmark of this venue.

The hall certainly benefits from its bar, and even though we could only opt for coffee that evening, the hospitality could not be faulted. The programme was detailed and often colourful, with a great cover picture. In contrasting monochrome to match the set were the cast photos and info.

SETTING & PROPS:

Here was a striking-looking black and white set which summed up the theme of the production. The whole effect was blatantly binary, with computer codes on many surfaces, looking like a monochrome cityscape. A clever design by Ed Court and Cathy Court.

Props: largely connected to the early computer industry, so obviously, they had to have a convincing retro feel. This was achieved pretty well, and the two computer work stations for the two locations simply had a change of name boards and, really, nothing more complicated was needed.

We loved the literal “mail” sign which represented the slow migration of a message from one computer to another – the ground-breaking realisation of a burning ambition for these precocious young dreamers.

The hand-made “starship” (a shopping trolley with lights!) for the big sci-fi event, was clever and amusing, and I include the spaceship fancy-dress, as it was an amazing construction as much as a costume!

MUSIC & MOVEMENT:

Although uncredited in the programme, the choreographer was surely Director, Cathy Court, given her extensive professional experience in the dance world.

The movement was expressive, energetic, and avoided any infiltration of post Millenium dance clichés. The cast performed the routines with confidence and panache

Ticket Outta Loserville and What’s So Weird About me? proved to be favourite numbers. I must admit my highlights included any song performed by Harry Tunningly as Lucas

The members of Thomas Duchan’s on-stage band (partly hidden by the set) were deservedly among the stars of the show. The only really visible guitar player was superb, and the sextet created a really big sound. Occasionally, though, it was too big and tended to compete with the vocalists whose mics were also rather loud, risking distortion ...

LIGHTING AND SOUND:

Good, as one comes to expect of WOW. The use of torches, and glitterball and UV were imaginative extras and the lovely planetarium ambience was effective. The general lighting plot was never too bright, which made it feel suitably in period.

Even the colours of the almost-vintage clothing came over well in this lighting. It just WAS 1971.

COSTUMES:

A combination of geeky, preppy and sci-fi fancy dress. The latter category led to some imaginative futuristic creations, whether hired or sourced “in house”. The astonishing satellite-style foil dress was a stunner. Loved the Yugoslavian girls’ cute little red mini dresses and black wigs

PERFORMANCES:

In a cast of this size it would be impossible to mention every person individually, so may I start with praising the company as a whole for what came over as commitment, team playing and talent. From age 12 to 20, nobody gave less than their best.

MICHAEL DORK Chris Tierney made a realistic geeky student. Convincing in his awkwardness and his shyness with Holly, Chris was also blessed with a good singing voice.

HOLLY MANSON Isabella Chapman portrayed this quite complex character with conviction and charm. Her confidence, good diction and again, a very nice singing voice, made this a pleasure to watch and hear. The traditional specs-disguising-a-pretty-face worked well.

LUCAS LLOYD We really liked Harry Tunningley as Lucas. He looked great in his bow tie and colourful tank top, but it was his cheeky, expressive personality and versatile voice with its impressive range, that really endeared him to the audience. His “Holly I’m The One” was full of juvenile frustration. At such a young age, Harry did really well.

FRANCIS WEIR James Harris played another of Michael’s geeky pals – obsessed with Star Trek! James was also a convincing member of this brainy team.

MARVIN CAMDEN Jake Collis took on this role – a rather quieter young man than most of his friends, and another Star Trek addict. Jake gave strong support and clearly enjoyed himself.

EDDIE ARCH Tom Nicoll has the height to play a slightly older character, a young man with arrogance, out for himself and nobody else. Perhaps a bit more of a bullying air could have reinforced his performance, and his opening costume made him look youthfully lanky rather than a smooth young braggart, but for his age Tom was commendable - We were astounded that he is only 14.

LEIA DAWKINS – Daisy Greenwood captured the sulky, selfish and materialistic personality of Eddie’s attractive but unpleasant girlfriend. We occasionally had trouble hearing her diction in the songs.

ELAINE FRIEND Yasmin Sharp gave good value as Leia’s crony, Elaine, showing us the girl’s catty edge

SAMANTHA POWDEN Amy Seymour’s Samantha, was a more kind-hearted friend of Leia’s and played the part with confidence and animation, differentiating the character from Leia and Elaine. A sci-fi geek at heart, she carried off the costume with quirky panache.

IVANKA AND MARINA What a delightful pairing this was: Alice Tunningley and Charlotte Tofts as the two look-alike and act-alike Yugoslavian girls. My companion Anne said they reminded her of the cheeky girls – they were certainly cheeky and looked remarkably alike. Their movements were very well co-ordinated. Enjoyable to watch.

HUEY PHILLIPS AND WAYNE PAGODA – Fraser McLauchlan and Will Hackett worked very well together (and with Eddie) as the would-be entrepreneur’s tough guys. Steady and amusing work.

SUMMARY

Loserville is never going to be the top musical in most people’s books, but these quirky modern-day shows which pop up from time to time are always a refreshing change and a much-needed shot in the proverbial arm for the business. The appeal to younger performers cannot be underestimated.

Cathy Court’s clever casting and focussed direction ensured that the mood of anticipation built up steadily through to the historic moment when – gasp! – one computer was able to send a message which the other one received. This is in fact an iconic moment in our recent history and we could feel the actors’ hope, despair and finally excitement.

Despite the rather loud volume at times of the otherwise excellent band (and the singers), we enjoyed watching a show with a difference and we applaud the company for its energy and talent.

Regards

Liz Mullen

Adjudicator