

NORTH ESSEX THEATRE GUILD

SHOWCASE FESTIVAL 2013-14

Group: WOW (Witham Operatic Workshop)

Production: Grease by Jim Jacobs & Warren Casey

Adjudication Date: Tues February 18, 2014

Venue: Witham Public Hall

Adjudicator: Liz Mullen, with Dawn King

INTRODUCTION:

The appeal of the late 50s never seems to lose its “cool”. Generations later, young performers are still fired up by the rock n’ roll pastiche songs, dance moves, hairstyles and clothes. Much of this is thanks to the film version starring John Travolta and Olivia Newton-John, though The Fonz can also take some credit.

It’s a great show for talented youngsters and their directors to get their teeth into. The show has some serious points to make, but its overall message is that youth can be FUN.

FRONT OF HOUSE:

Very friendly and helpful, as always, with a good seat provided despite the early rush of ticket sales which ensured an excellent and enthusiastic house. I do admire the “proper” bar which is either new since my last visit or I’d missed it! Many thanks for the kindness of interval drinks.

One or two of the FoH female stewards were dressed in 50s style, while one lady wasn’t (on the occasion of our visit), and we thought it would have been nice to have a consistent look. Of course, we wouldn’t expect FoH management to be wearing anything other than the usual – and always admired – evening suit.

A very informative programme was on offer, made doubly interesting by the “location” photographs.

SETTING:

With the splendid orchestra perched high at the rear of the stage, and most of the acting area consisting of tiers of wonderfully American “bleachers”, it was amazing how well this confined space actually worked.

Of course, without the extended apron it would have been a different story, but as things were, not only did the staging assure some wonderful groupings, but it still left room for some unstinting choreography – and for the convincing front half of a car to be pushed on and off efficiently!

COSTUMES:

For the boys, white Ts with jeans and the inevitable leather jackets, topped off by some excellent hairstyling, with quiffs and D.A.s proudly in evidence. One look in the mirror and these actors must have immediately “felt” the part. Only one had rather floppier hair, possibly due to the difficulty of taming an existing, thicker style rather than giving in to a bit of a trim!

The girls looked good, from homely to downright kookie, some in Pink Ladies jackets. Sandy’s wigs were a little bit obvious, whereas Frenchy’s brightly coloured variations were *excusably* obvious, and fitted well. Sandy’s Sandra Dee look was effectively accomplished with the cardis, pink and white dresses etc, while the other

girls were dressed according to their personalities. We liked Jan's cute, high-plaited bunches, and Rizzo's tight black skirt gave her the blasé, sinuous posture this abrasive character requires. The red lipstick marked her out as vamp.

Sandy's transformation for You're The One That I Want was quite a quick-change! Rather too quick to tease the wig properly into its style, but still a dramatic switch.

By contrast, the teacher looked suitably formal.

Eugene's nerdish outfit and hair summed him up at first glance, while Vince Fontaine's OTT glittery look was perfect for this super-smooth, ageing radio DJ. And let's hear it for the snappily-clad Johnny Casino!

The Teen Angel is often portrayed with wings, too, but WOW's version, in his Elvis-like suit, was still appropriate, if less spectacular. We especially loved the gloriously dream-like costumes of the other (female) angels in Frenchy's fantasy - almost like a Busby Berkeley movie.

LIGHTING/SOUND:

On occasion, the intensity of the colour washes actually made it difficult to see the cast on the bleachers, and the sides had dark patches which showed in full-company numbers. But Nigel Northfield had coped with lighting the orchestra above and all the acting areas below, incorporating isolated areas of the apron (such as Sandy's room and the radio station) and – on most occasions - the bleachers. He was ably backed up by his team of assistants.

The sound was well balanced and radio mics worked well. The Vince Fontaine sound was well executed. At odd moments, volume seemed to fluctuate, such as in the girls parts in Summer Nights and Freddy My Love.

MUSIC/DANCE:

The choreography was quite an accomplishment in the amount of stage space between the bleachers and the front of the apron. The dancing and movement in Grease is high-energy, powered by youthful hormones. It can also be complicated, as in the hand-jive combinations. So, well done to Nikki Mundell-Poole for the choreography itself, which was varied and complex, and for ensuring that the young cast performed it with such dedication.

Emma Firth's orchestra came over as a little bit sax-heavy (jazz rather than rock) in their hidden overture, but from the moment the curtains opened, there could be no criticism of their excellent and professional contribution to this production. Their presence aloft was never a visual distraction, which is a compliment to them and to the cast.

There were, of course, particular musical highlights, including Born To Hand Jive, Mooning, the joyful We Go Together and Greased Lightning with its well-planned passing of tyres between main characters and "mechanics".

PERFORMANCES:

DANNY ZUKO: The casting of Danny is crucial to this show, and Nikki was blessed to have a tall, good-looking, confident actor who can sing! Ben Huish was believably the big crush of the Class of 59. Strutting, hair-combing, jacket-shrugging – all the components of the American high school youth of the period – were authentically there in Ben’s performance, with his singing and dancing equally up to the mark. His reaction to the modernised Sandy was good. Although Danny’s inner decency and vulnerability are only fleetingly revealed, Ben handled those moments with ease.

SANDY: I was convinced at first that an older actress was “ageing down” to play Sandy. Ashton Reed is a more than useful performer for any society to have in their ranks, but she didn’t always achieve the youthful charm of Sandy, although she showed spirit in her new image for You’re The One That I Want. Ashton sang powerfully throughout. Her separated duet with the Radio Singer (Raining On Prom Night) was very nicely done.

KENICKIE: Plenty of brash swagger here from Ed Tunningley as the class achiever, in terms of already having real (rather than imagined) experience of women (or at least Rizzo) and managing to get himself a car, however much work it is going to need. Ed gave us a character who would probably always be over-confident in adult life, but would almost certainly make a good go of it. He led the Greased Lightning number very well.

ROGER: As the character with the mooning habit, Roger is an entertaining role, and Mark Ellis gave it his all (stopping short of an actual moon, of course!) Mark was amusing and appealing, and related well to the rest of his classmates, including Jan, with whom he performed his featured number. We also enjoyed his duet with Doody.

DOODY: Well done to Jack Martyn for being actor, singer, guitarist and valuable member of the company. At only 14, he carried Doody’s number, Those Magic Changes, very well, and his musicality showed again in his duet which was a second-half highlight.

SONNY: We enjoyed Chris Tierney’s amusing bravado as Sonny. He is cool and slick with his mates but still in awe of his teachers, a balance which Chris made amusing and believable.

RIZZO: Cooler-than-cool - in fact positively chilly on the surface, but human and fallible beneath - that’s Rizzo. Sarah Williams clearly loved the role. Not easy at this age to portray the complexity of this character, and a little more direction might have helped Sarah to show more leadership in the dining area, even more spite in the girls’ bedroom - and perhaps more depth in her attitude to Kenickie, when she thought she was pregnant. In her number There Are Worse Things I Could Do, Sarah could have been shown how to start off with more defiance and arrogance, and close on a note of vulnerability.

JAN: Rhianna Howard was lovely to watch. Her Jan – a girl with a taste for life – was bubbly, cute and wide-eyed. You always noticed Rhianna in company numbers, because of her energy and commitment. She maintained her character at all times.

FRENCHY: The beauty school drop-out who is constantly experimenting with her hair – what a great character to play. Bell Tull seemed to enjoy it, and so did we. Her scenes with the other girls and with Teen Angel were performed with confidence.

MARTY: Hatty Gribben made a delightful Marty. Not a scene-grabber, but a key member of the girls all the same. We enjoyed her song, Freddy My Love.

EUGENE: Quite a challenge, playing the only uncool boy in the school! So well done to Dan Carr for his unswerving nerdishness in the amusing role of Eugene, especially in the high school dance scenes.

TEEN ANGEL: Although I felt instinctively that this was a new direction for Tim Rolph, he deserves credit for it, and encouragement. Usually hidden away as a drummer, Tim proved he could dress like Elvis and sing with sincerity. His lack of experience and/or confidence was only detectable by the way he looked only at Frenchy and didn't broaden his performance to take in the rest of us. We hope he appears on stage again soon.

JOHNNY CASINO: Take a bow, Callum Hoskin! As the amusingly diminutive character heading up the entertainment at the high school "hop" he not only performed Born To Hand Jive with confidence, but also imbued it with some bluesy maturity quite startling in a young man of 12 years old. Well done.

VINCE FONTAINE: The only adult in the cast, I suppose you could say, and David Finch's drama background was clear in this strong performance as ageing radio DJ and smooth-talker, Vince Fontaine. Very enjoyable little cameos!

PATTY SIMCOX: Dawn and I thoroughly enjoyed Alice Tunningley's little power house of energy that was the excitable cheerleader, Patty. Alice rarely just entered – she exploded! On one occasion with a dramatic cartwheel.

CHA-CHA: Charlotte Watling – transformed into a Latin diva in her wig and flouncy dress – made the most of her big moment on prom night.

RADIO SINGER: Charmingly performed, this was a cameo appearance in the radio studio by Katie Galley. Her duet with Sandy was not easy – they are on different sides of the stage – but it worked beautifully.

MISS LYNCH: Kate Farrell let other girls have most of the fun and dedicated herself to the role of the good-natured but firm teacher, keeping students and prom in order. She had good, clear diction, and had developed a posture which gave her a sense of gravitas beyond her years.

CHORUS: Well done to the boys and girls of the chorus, who had been drilled wonderfully well to fill the stage effectively. They inhabited the bleachers in disciplined groupings and provided background colour, music and dance.

DIRECTION/SUMMARY:

Well done to Nikki, Emma, Joe and the company, and thank you for a highly-charged, highly entertaining experience. The choreography was exciting and detailed, the stage used to its full extent, with no space wasted, and the cast had clearly been motivated and well-rehearsed.

The young men of the cast were particularly strong, from the five main principals (who demonstrated exemplary team work and awareness of each other on stage) to the younger ones who worked well in the chorus numbers.

The Pink Ladies didn't gel quite so convincingly as a group, although the ladies' chorus worked well.

The structure of the show means that the first half zips along, but the second half requires the leads to develop more depth to their characters, in order to maintain our interest and to keep up the pace. There were places in Act Two where the energy levels dipped slightly (the potential fight) and a bit more chemistry and engagement between Rizzo and Kenickie would have been effective.

But the reprises at the end pumped up the energy again and left us feeling thoroughly entertained.

*Liz Mullen and Dawn King
Adjudicators*