

## North Essex Theatre Guild Showcase Festival 2012-13

The Boyfriend

Witham Operatic Workshop

Friday February 22<sup>nd</sup> 2013-03-13

Adjudicated by Andrew Hodgson and Liz Mullen

### INTRODUCTION

In the days before the Andrew Lloyd Webber Blockbusters, the longest running British musicals were two charming shows written in the 1950's, that ran concurrently for six years. One was "Salad Days" by Julian Slade, and the other was Sandy Wilson's 1920's pastiche, "The Boyfriend". It started life as a one-act entertainment at the Players Theatre, and was such a hit that it was then expanded to a full-length show for its West-End transfer. The show has been revived by professional and amateur companies on many occasions since, and both Julie Andrews and Twiggy were propelled to stardom in the Broadway and movie versions.

We thought it was a lovely choice for a youth company to present, as the show offers different performance challenges to its cast from the more usual "Fames" and "Footlooses".

### FOH/PUBLICITY

Liz and I received a warm and courteous welcome from the smartly attired FOH team. Having the girls in 1920s dresses was a lovely, scene-setting touch. We were very well looked after; good seats were provided and the interval drinks much appreciated! The raffle was swiftly conducted (we loved the drum rolls that accompanied the announcement of winning tickets!). The programme was excellent; glossy, colourful and informative.

### SETTINGS

The set design was simple, but effective, in presenting the three locations required for the story. The raised platform and steps at the back, and the colourfully painted sea-view backdrop, served for each scene, with various amendments/additions and good furniture/set-dressing, enhancing the overall visual effect. We thought that the addition of some Chinese lanterns (against the starry night sky) in the café would have worked well. Properties were very good. A lot of effort had gone into their collection and making; we particularly admired the delicious looking ice-creams!

### SOUND/LIGHTING

A very effective lighting design was created with colour used to create a suitably romantic aura where needed and that absolutely essential period feel. There was also a very clear definition of time and place. In the bright and breezy song and dance routines, the lighting was complimentary. Cues were generally fine, although the starlit backdrop

in Act 3 was a little late coming on. Sound was also good. Again, cues were good and, with the singers not appearing to be amplified, everything sounded natural. The balance between the band and the performers was fine.

#### COSTUMES, HAIR and MAKE-UP

The wardrobe team had worked very hard to assemble a range of costumes that presented a real feel for the 1920s. The drop-waist frocks of all the girls were just right and Madame Dubonnet's elegant dresses and Lady Brockhurst's stunning ensemble in Act 2 were super. The striped swimming costumes were a comic delight. The boys and older men were suitably arrayed in blazers, flannels, cravats etc. The collection of fancy dress costumes in Act 3, made for an eye-filling finale to the show. We did feel that Hortense's maid's uniform would have been more at home in a nightclub and would not have passed muster with Madame D.! We were also puzzled by the lack of female headwear e.g. cloche hats, low-brimmed straws and bandanas. A 20's requisite surely? Also some of the girls' wigs were rather heavy, and not particularly flattering to their wearers. Both Polly and Maisie were obscured in profile by theirs! Not all girls in the 1920s had bobbed hair; earphones or buns would have been acceptable, thus enabling some of the performers to have used their own locks. However, Madame D's pompadour was fine and correctly served to make her look older. Some of the boy's hairstyles could also have been more authentic, but generally make-up was good, particularly on those characters who had to look older.

#### MUSIC AND CHOREOGRAPHY

These were two outstanding aspects of the show. Rob Miles and his talented band did a great job in creating, to our ears, an authentic period sound that was always sympathetic to the young performers. It is usual to hear "The Boyfriend" with a piano and drums accompaniment, so it was great to hear the tuneful score played more fulsomely. A bright and breezy pace was set from the outset! Well done!

The choreography was smashing! We loved all of the ensemble numbers, particularly "Sur La Plage", which was an energetic joy, with the dancing imaginatively augmented by the striped umbrellas and beach paraphernalia! It was great to see even the smallest chap in the cast doing the charleston with confidence and fun! Very well done everyone!

#### PERFORMANCES

**HORTENSE:** Sarah Williams reminded us slightly of musical star Claire Sweeney, with her lovely smile and stage presence. She brought verve, warmth and a suitable dash of French "ooh-la-la", to her big numbers which were performed with skill and confidence.

**MADAME DUBONNET:** Charlotte Watling looked elegant and soignée, and in her "Poor Little Pierrette", duet with Polly, was touching in her motherly concern. She needed to be more flamboyant and flirty in the "You-Don't-Want-To-Play-With-Me Blues" with Percival, but Charlotte is to be commended for tackling a difficult role and making a considerable success of it.

PERCIVAL BROWNE: With a good aging make-up and a mature colour to his voice, James Simpson gave an able performance. He caught Percival's initial up-right dignity very well and then used very amusing facial reactions to bring out the humour of the role. His participation in the "Play-With-Me Blues" was a delight, and he played very well opposite Charlotte as Madame Dubonnet.

POLLY BROWNE: This was a charming performance from Rachel Goddard, who was the perfect 1920's heroine. Very expressive in her speaking and singing, Rachel was sincere and believable, without making Polly too saccharine! She reacted very well to her fellow players, and her two duets with Tony were among the highlights of the production. Very well done Rachel!

TONY BROCKHURST: We were impressed by Mark Ellis' confident and incisive portrayal of Tony. He had a very clear and resonant voice, moved well on stage and looked exactly right. Mark was ideally paired with Rachel. They made a charming and convincing couple, exemplified in their lovely performance of "A Room in Bloomsbury". Very well done Mark!

MAISIE: Maisie is a direct contrast to Polly, flirtatious and extrovert, she also has two of the best numbers in the show! Rosie Goddard was vivacious and filled the stage with fun! Pert and lively, her pair playing with Ed's Bobby yielded the show-stopping routine "Won't You Charleston With Me?". As this was near the beginning of the show, the whole tone of the production was clarified and built-upon in true twenties style! Well done!

BOBBY: Ed Tunningley's brash American hooper danced up a storm and made an ideal foil for Maisie. His accent was convincing and his reactions were great-always in character! Ed seemed very confident on stage and looked as though he was having a good time; exactly what this role requires!

LORD BROCKHURST: This is a very funny character role and Michael Watling played it to the comedic hilt! With his monocle and a wandering eye, he was every inch the endearing old buffer! Portraying a much older man is a real challenge to a young actor but physically, and vocally, Michael performance was well-observed. His duet with Dulcie was a comic highlight in the show. Well done!

LADY BROCKHURST: Libby Johnson gave us a formidable characterisation. She looked and sounded just right. With an imperious manner and withering looks, Libby made it clear from her first entrance that she would brook no nonsense from her erring husband! Her reaction when she was finally re-united with her missing son, presented a nice contrast in her performance.

DULCIE: For most of the show, Dulcie is very much “one of the gang” until she is given a chance to shine in her duet with Lord Brockhurst. Isabella Tull seized upon this opportunity with saucer-eyed glee! She performed with a verve and flirtatiousness that was perfect for the character and made this famous duet a complete delight!

FAY and NANCY: Although they didn’t have any solo moments, Charlotte Tofts and Amy Seymour both created clearly differentiated, individual personalities within the main group of “Perfect Young Ladies”. Both girls had good facial reactions and danced with their partners in true “flapper” style! Well done!

ALPHONSE, MARCEL and PIERRE: Liz and I both felt that the performances of all the young men in this production were of a particularly high standard. These three French “boyfriends” were a joy to watch throughout. Amusing accents, very good reactions, and strong singing were all evident, and they more than held their own in the dance routines. We also liked the fact that each chap had a clearly delineated personality! Well done!

WAITER/GENDARME: Callum Hoskin may have been the smallest and possibly youngest member of the cast, but a big personality shone through in both roles and in the ensembles. The director had capitalised on this, and Callum’s fleeting, but hilarious, appearance as the Gendarme at the end of Act 2 brought the house down!

TANGO DANCER: Alice Tunningley looked stunning and made a lithe and sultry impression with her dancing!

ENSEMBLE: It was a great idea to augment the cast and have a larger ensemble in the musical numbers. They enhanced the vocals and filled the stage with colour and movement, particularly in the fancy dress scene. The girls looked lovely and reacted well to all the action. Well done!

## SUMMARY

Cathy Court’s colourful production really cheered up a cold February evening. A lively pace was set from the start, enhanced by a terrific band and exuberant period choreography. The blocking of the action, using the levels created by the set, made a dynamic visual impression. The company looked as though they had been well-rehearsed and knew exactly what was required of them. We were impressed that everyone in the cast spoke correctly and clearly, essential for the period feel of this show. There were times when we would have liked more light and shade in the dialogue, and the pointing up of some key and curtain lines. Overall, we were impressed with the characterisations of all the cast, with extra credit given to those playing older parts, never an easy thing for young actors to do! The comic elements of the story were nicely exploited. This was a highly entertaining production, which we could happily have watched all over again!

Best wishes

Andrew Hodgson (Adjudicator)