



## ROSE BOWL ADJUDICATION

Name of Company: **GLASTONBURY & STREET MUSICAL COMEDY SOCIETY**

Name of Production: **'SLEEPING BEAUTY'**

Venue: Strode Theatre, Street

Date: 30<sup>th</sup> December 2019

After reading Alan Frayn's script I was left with the feeling that, well as it was written, there are verbal 'gags' by the bucket full, there was very little guidance and help as to where to place and how physical and mimed comedy was to be generated.

It reminded me of that 'Strip Poker' scene in 'Anything Goes' when Billy Crocker and Moonface Martin 'con' two Chinese gentlemen out of their clothes in order to facilitate their escape from the brig. Victor Moore and Leslie Henson who originated the roles were superb, if very different in style comedy actors. They added to the bare bones that librettists Guy Bolton and PG Wodehouse supplied them with, brilliant comedy routines that regularly stopped the show. It is rare in a modern production of Cole Porter's musical to find this scene played with anything added to the written dialogue and as such it usually only produces a limited number of laughs.

Author Alan Frayn can have no complaints about the way in which his script was presented and performed here. This was a stylishly presented show, which with a good choice of costumes, attractive scenery, (my only complaint being a tendency for some of the backcloths to be in need of a good stretch to pull out the wrinkles in them), a well designed expertly presented lighting plot, and good balance to the sound input. Visually, and vocally the players were presented in a manner that showed their talents off in a favourable light.

Talents that certainly were well capable of handling the challenges placed before them. The Director obviously had gone through the script with a fine tooth comb and faithfully set about drawing every humorous and dramatic nuance from its pages. Those series of verbally humorous pages were presented at speed in a manner designed to draw the last laugh out of them. With the predominantly very young audience who joined me at a

matinee performance not surprisingly, for all the quality of the delivery, quite a proportion of this verbal comedy fell on deaf ears. I can readily appreciate that at other performances the same sequences were met with far more appreciative responses.

This takes me back to the reference to that scene in 'Anything Goes.' On stage, where players who, when given the office were quite ready to involve the audience and indeed did so at every opportunity offered to them, received immediate and strong response to their efforts. There were simply not enough moments in the script for physical and mimed comedy to be introduced, not enough, 'He's behind you' and 'hiss the villain' moments to excite those young theatre goers. There was, as is the case in virtually all pantomimes nowadays, professional and local, an absence of slapstick humour, no one got wet, covered in flour or paste. I know the problems facing any company going down the slapstick road, not least insurance, but the rewards in the form of response from the younger members of the audience is so great as to make the loss of such moments a tragedy.

I may bemoan a shortage of inventive comedy business within the production but looking at the presentation in full it has to be described as a good quality show. This was a production team who knew their company well and under firm guidance from the Director invariably made the most of the players' talents. Actors were not allowed to merely present a suitable image, they had also to create a character to fit that image. If the hand of the Director was to be seen in that area then in equalling proportions the skill of the Choreographer could be seen in the way in which a company of varying ages and dancing abilities were welded together to continually present pleasing, attractive images that fitted the changing mood of the storyline and music.

All of that did not occur without a great deal of planning and leadership at rehearsals from the Director and Choreographer. Any more than the sixteen scenes could have appeared without much preparation and hard work by the Stage teams.

Whilst this group took care of the visual and dramatic part of the show the Musical Director ensured that the production was of a similar quality musically. The good arrangements and strong support that was always forthcoming from the Orchestra 'pit' must have given soloists and chorus added confidence which they showed in the joyful way in which they delivered their wares.

## **Individual Performances**

### **Good Fairy Lilac / Witch Hazel**

I start with this pair because they fit admirably into the pre-show lighting arrangements, Mauve and Blue around that star studded back cloth. This effect was enhanced by the Lighting set up, who then picked up the two very well costumed Ladies when they appeared. One small criticism about the Witch, in later scenes there were moments when a denser amount of green light could have been focused on her to add to the effect. The Good Fairy also found herself in a nasty straight line shortly afterwards for an exchange of dialogue with Fetch and Carry, King and Queen, the Dame and Muddles. Fortunately, words quickly gave way to a well arranged musical sequence, and on to another nicely lit scene, Red and Gold

at the Palace, where our Good Fairy took the opportunity to give us a taste of her vocal powers.

When Witch Hazel reappeared at the Christening there was a good display of OTT 'Panto' evil which left us with the sort of character on display who thoughly deserved the ferocious comments of some of the younger members of the audience when asked what her fate should be. With her attendant group of young fairy attendants, 'Good' in the form of Fairy Lilac was always going to have the edge over 'Evil' Witch Hazel. In a straight fight between these two well drawn, well played characters, the match was far more even.

### **Young Princess Rose / Senior Dancers**

In the limited time at her disposal this Young Princess Rose created a very firm character, crisply delivering the dialogue and showing us enough vocal and terpsichorean skills to convince us that here was a great deal of talent that would have to remain untapped on this occasion. A team player, Young Rose slipped easily into the group of Senior Dancers. This group interpreted the thoughtful choreography supplied to them in a disciplined manner. As a result, one finely drawn picture followed another in the scenes in which they were involved. In view of the limited space, especially when quite a few other characters shared the stage with them, it says much for the planning of the choreographer and skill of the dancers that the stage never looked overcrowded and the picture untidy or muddled.

### **Muddles / Dame Hettie**

It seems logical to follow the word muddled at the end of the previous remarks about the Senior Dancers contribution to the production with a look at the contribution made by 'Muddles' and 'Dame Hettie'. Muddles worked like a trojan on his first entrance to make contact with the audience and 'warm them up' for the fun that was to come. In one respect, like the good trooper he obviously is, he was successful in his endeavours. The younger element in the audience immediately latched on to his invitation to respond to his every entrance. The fact that he had less response to the pure verbal input was not his fault, any more than it was of Dame Hattie whose entrance followed that of Muddles. Introduced in an unusual way via the TV screen relaying 'her' byplay in the auditorium, prior to actually appearing on stage. Given the chance to play directly to the audience here again was a seasoned performer who knew how to handle such a challenge.

When a musical element was added to their efforts Muddles and Dame Hattie moved up a gear in quick order. There was a moment when it was a question of 'out of sight out of mind', at Princess Rose's Christening, when Muddles was masked as he delivered quite a few lines, and as is always the case in such circumstances they thereby lost part of their effect. Usually in such circumstances you can ask the question, why did the actor not move from behind their masker, but on this occasion, Muddles was trapped towards the rear and had no chance to do so.

The choice of songs as we drew towards the end of the show could have been a bit more bright and breezy. As it was this duo had to pick up the mood almost from a standing start after the Prince and Princess sang, perfectly nicely, their last romantic duet. Add to that an

audience that gave the minimum of help to their efforts to involve them in the 'Birthday' sequence, and there was far more sparkle in the visual ending of the show than the vocal and spoken word.

It is often said, usually by people who have never tried to play to a live audience, that there is no such thing as a bad audience only poor performances. Watching this duo working their socks off for a reward far less than their efforts and talent deserved made a nonsense of that oft made theatrical remark.

### **Prince Alexis / Princess Rose**

When a traditional 'Panto' is in full flight with characters like the Dame, Muddles, Fetch and Carry all fighting for bragging rights as to who has the strongest connection with the audience and who is getting the biggest response from them, the romantic pairing at the heart of the story can often become secondary figures in the production. Aided by the way in which this story developed and the presence of two sprightly players in the roles of the Prince and Princess this pairing was never going to be pushed into the background. The exchange between the disguised Witch and Prince was full of local references, which struck a chord immediately with the paying customers, and delivered in the sort of clear cut manner that ensured that those who did not know the locale could still grasp the sort of targets they were aimed at. Immediately following his exchange, we could compare the two Princess Roses who metamorphosised neatly into one.

The duet which opened Act 2 saw our two young lovers blending well together in song. For a second half musical starter however, this was rather a downbeat number. The work of Dancers in this sequence was extremely good. Maybe not as important but equally well done, was the sound effect of the tower being unlocked by Rose.

A finely balanced pairing this duo took admirable care of the romance within this story.

### **Fetch / Carry**

If I thought that this script underused the Dame and Muddles then it has to be said that this pair were given even less mileage. To say that they lived on humorous scraps from the rich man's table would be putting it mildly. Like a pair of good blockers in an American Football team this did not phase either of you. Heads down and hearts high, you ploughed through your dialogue delivering it as if it was part of a Shakespearean sonnet, reacting with similar enthusiasm to all the action going on around you.

These were team players who played the hand dealt to them to the hilt with the result that their contributions to every scene or musical number they were involved in was added to by their presence.

### **King Cactus / Queen Marigold**

The legendary American comedian, Jimmy Durante, he who sings 'Make Someone Happy' as the final titles role at the end of 'Sleepless in Seattle', was oft heard to cry, "Everybody wants to get into the act" whenever he thought someone else was trying to usurp his place as the show's top comedian. When this duo appeared to make a third duo, Dame Hettie and Muddles, Fetch and Carry, had already thrown their hats into the ring, to make use of the verbal comedy in the script, it began to look overcrowded in that department. Which brings me back to the shortage of opportunity for physical comedy. Had more such opportunities been available I am sure that the aforementioned quartet would have been more than capable of fully milking such chances, which in turn would have brought greater responses from the younger end of the audience age range.

With that scenario in place, the King and Queen could have been seen to better effect handling the more sophisticated verbal comedy left at their disposal. All that being said, no complaints about the way in which they both presented the dialogue placed before them. There were moments when their position of authority as King and Queen could have been given greater emphasis. In one Palace scene the Queen disappeared for quite lengthy periods masked by Chorus members.

The nicely judged bickering between this pair left us wishing that they had been given a shot at a suitable vocal duet in this same vein, 'Chu-Chi Face' from 'Chitty, Chitty, Bang, Bang' would have served the purpose very well.

### **Junior Chorus / Rainbow Fairies**

One of my first notes refers to six enchanting young Fairies and as the production developed there was no reason to reassess that note. When a line or two of dialogue came their way, these young ladies were never found wanting making clear decisive interjections when asked to do so.

I presume that it was members of the Junior Chorus who gave the impression of having come from St Trinians, not ill disciplined performances but deliberately untidy in appearance. Just as the finely turned out Rainbow Fairies were always a strong definite support team for Good Fairy Lilac, so the Junior Chorus could be relied on to give enthusiastic support to all the scenes in which they were involved.

Most importantly both of these teams were always fully committed to the cause, ready and very willing to enhance any action and react to dialogue and music alike. Visually, musically, and dramatically they were therefore a distinct plus to the production.

*Thank you for an ideal seat from which to observe the production and check the responses of quite a few of the audience. The interval coffee and chance to ask questions about the production were much appreciated. Gerry Parker*