

**NORTH ESSEX THEATRE GUILD
Showcase Festival**

Wickham Bishops Drama Club

REFLEX

11th July 2015

Introduction

This was a colourful, joyous celebration of the music and sketches we associate with the 1980s, and we were pleased to be reminded of what fun it had been! We were very envious of your spacious, well appointed hall, and you certainly used it to good effect.

An annual revue is clearly a popular community event for this group and the audience were very appreciative.

Front of House

Everyone was very friendly and helpful, and we were shown to a table where our seats had been reserved. Laid out cabaret-style with tables and chairs arranged accordingly, the colourful red tablecloths helped to make the hall seem very comfortably full. The programme was informative with its snippets of 80s history, but by rights should have credited the authors and songwriters of the numbers and sketches performed.

Lighting & Sound

This venue is well equipped with one well stocked lighting bar in the auditorium, and good height for this purpose. On stage as well as more floods and spots some disco style lighting was used to good 80s effect. Your magnificent front tabs were shown off to good effect by tab warmers at the start, and Everyone wore microphones, and although I do prefer unamplified voices, especially for the spoken word, the sound balance was good with minimal distortion.

Set and Staging

This company had the benefit of a deep stage with sets of black tabs in good condition, and these were well lit and appropriately used for the various sketches and numbers. Good use was made of 80s style disco lighting for some of the iconic numbers.

Props

Props were minimal in this show, but those used in the sketches were appropriate.

Costumes and Make-up

The costumes for this production were excellent: colourful and varied. Each number, however brief, was meticulously costumed and co-ordinated. Good use was clearly made of sets of costumes from previous shows, and provided a colourful pageant in keeping with the 80s theme. See also my comments under each sketch and number.

Music

The show used a mixture of live accompanied numbers and dances to recorded music. The band was well worth listening to, with some fine guitar solos and the leading keyboards providing a confident and skilful backing for some of the numbers. They kicked us off with a lively They were clearly 80s enthusiasts (and if not, gave a very good impression of being so!) and took us on a whistle-stop tour of the popular music of the decade. Their other musical interludes added to the whole, and helped the action to move on smoothly.

Structure

The show running order and the selection of pieces was skilfully put together, with welcome variation in the pace and mood. Personally I would have enjoyed more songs from Brits – some Boy George/Culture Club and maybe some Police?

Choreography

Heather made excellent use of her different groups, giving them both special pieces of their own (such as the Adult Ladies who finished the first half with a rousing interpretation of “Walking on Sunshine”) and blending the whole company as with the finale version of the same number.

Acting / Sketches

It is no simple thing to deliver a punchline effectively. The timing is crucial, as is awareness of audience reaction, and these are things to develop as confidence grows. There were some delightful sketches from the 80s revisited, and the young “Two Ronnies” Archie Gunton and Ben Howard gave assured performances in their check jackets and glasses, with co-ordinated paper shuffling, but rushed the lines a little, not waiting long enough for the punchlines to hit home or sink in. Len Howard's Poem “The 80s” evoked memories of that decade very well, but was a little tentatively delivered. Jack Lawrence certainly caught the cultured, bored and laconic feel of Rowan Atkinson's original performance as Gerald the Gorilla, with Sue Walker's interviewer feeding the straight role questions perfectly, but Len Howard's explorer/professor rather under projected, and did not give pause for the laughs.

“Kids in the 80s” brought back some memories highlighting the very different behaviour and technology back then. The whole group was involved, and this is a challenge with such numbers. I would have liked to have seen more movement, or just a more imaginative arrangement of everyone on stage, although I can understand that this could have caused the children involved problems in remembering when to come in.

Sue Walker's rendition of the Pam Ayres poem “I Wish I'd Looked After Me Teeth” was skilfully done, and the audience warmed to her.

Debbi Allen and Linda Burgess had their schoolgirl behaviour down to a T, although I couldn't identify the sketch. Was this Victoria Wood, Katherine Tate or maybe French and Saunders? (See my note about acknowledgements in the programme, above). Then “I don't want to go to school Mum” dramatised poem would have benefited from blocking which allowed us to see more of the children's faces, and which might have given more of a twist at the end, but was spoken with some good expression, if rather fast.

Production and direction

The direction and stage management were very tight. Moving considerable numbers of

performers on and off stage over the duration of more than 20 pieces so that the whole show flows is not easy and the backstage crew are to be commended for this.

Numbers

The Adam Ant compilation started us off in the right mood, and the costumes were suggestive of the New Romantic style of Adam and the Ants. It was a smart move to use black eye masks to suggest Ant's signature white and black eye-make-up, as this allowed for quick changes for the following sketches and songs.

The Cyndi Lauper number "True Colours" was sung as a duet with Debbie and Annelise dressed in appropriate red and green 80s prom dresses, and started a little tentatively, but grew in strength as it developed. It wasn't clear that the slide show which divided them onstage was 80s related, rather, I think it showed their earlier relationship as girls. On reflection, I would have preferred the two singers to have related to each other onstage rather than being static with a divide between them. It was difficult for audience members not knowing the individuals to get much from the slide show.

"Lucky Star" displayed the dance talents of the Junior girls in sparsy gold tops. Full marks for enthusiasm and poise. The group need to aim for a nit more co-ordination – keeping those arm movements together.

"Like A Virgin" was hilarious. The women set the number uop well, with the glam figures upstage having their backs turned – their take-over of the piece revealing that these were three vibrantly differenet drag acts was bold and good fun. The central figure in red (was that Jack?) had the provocative sexy movements well captured, and the other two performers looked good but didn't quite have the confidence to give the performance their physical all. All three could have belted the number out more – if you're going to play outrageous, go for it!

"Winner Takes It All" saw Laura resplendent in a black and gold dress. She began slightly off key, but as she got into the song sang sweetly. She began in a very static pose, but again, used more animation as she settled into the number, and ended on a triumphant impassioned high.

The Duet "Time After Time" also began a little hesitantly, but soon grew in confidence and sweetness. The balance of Linda's and Jack's voices was perfect. The band accompaniment was sensitive and melodious.

"Walking on Sunshine" was a rousing end to the first half

The Adult Ladies had some fun with Bananarama's "Venus" and turned it into a joke on the ladies' razor of the same name (Not an 80s product!). But excellently co-ordinated and lovely white dresses.

We loved Madness's "Baggy Trousers" and hats off to the Boys Chorus for keeping their cool when their number's start was delayed. They didn't turn a hair and went straight on to ive us some good entertainment, singing, I think to the backing track.

I love the exuberance of Wham's "Wake Me Up Before You Go Go" and this was pranced in suitable

Michaels-like style, complete with the "Choose Life" T shirts from their video. At first I thought this was an oblique reference to the film "Trainspotting" (but that's 1996) , but then have just revisited the Wham video, so now I know! Great energy and singing.

"Lady in Red" a lyrical dance to a well-loved sentimental number, with some good flowing arm movements, but not completely in synch.

Superman got us on our feet and enjoyably involved. My companion pointed out the words in the programme and taught me the moves (I clearly didn't go to the right parties in the 80s!) at the interval, so we were well prepared.

The very 80s "Footloose" reminded me of school concerts of the time and was beautifully done, and The reprieve of "Walking on Sunshine" for the whole cast left us tapping our feet all the way to the car park at the end of the show.

Summary

A highly enjoyable show which got us humming all the way home, and did justice to the 80s acts to which it paid tribute. We enjoyed the audience participation, too. Thank you for having us.

Sheila Foster with Jane Rayner
NETG Adjudicators