

NORTH ESSEX THEATRE GUILD SHOWCASE FESTIVAL 2013-14

Group: WICKHAM BISHOPS DRAMA CLUB
Production: SMILE
Adjudication Date: 11TH JULY 2014
Venue: WICKHAM BISHOPS VILLAGE HALL
Adjudicator: Dawn King accompanied by David King

INTRODUCTION:

This was our first visit to this lovely facility for a couple of years, and the car park was pretty full when we arrived, with family groups and couples excitedly chattering about the forthcoming entertainment. This set the tone for the whole evening, which seemed to us to embody a true community spirit.

FRONT OF HOUSE:

The audience seating arrangements for the evening were informal, round large tables, and my request for a clear view of the stage was swiftly and efficiently dealt with. Fortunately we had been reminded that we needed to take our own drink for the evening!

The programme was bright and clearly set out, and the display of rehearsal photographs served to whet our appetite for the evening ahead. Pre-show music was not obtrusive, allowing groups to have easy conversations, but setting a “musical theatre” atmosphere.

SETTING & PROPS:

The revue moved easily between dance/song and comedy numbers. There was limited use of set, but where this was introduced, such as the counter in Act 2 and the “sea” for the synchronised swimming, it provided the necessary framework for the accompanying sketch and was moved quickly and efficiently. The curtaining was used to great effect to create different depth on the stage, and enhanced the lighting effects considerably. We liked the use of projection onto the side tabs, and the stars back cloth in Almost Nearly Perfect. From where we were sitting however, we could often see into the wings because the front tabs were pulled too far back. Marking the ropes might avoid that happening in future.

Cast handled their props well, and it was good to see the younger members of the group confidently using their props (and costume) to create atmospheric effects in numbers such as Under the Sea.

COSTUMES:

The reputation of this group for excellence in costume was very evident in this production. They were simply stunning, and added so much to the visual impact of the production. The attention to detail was exemplary. There were some numbers that really stood out for us– the opening of Act 2 (Happy), where my notes just say WOW! in response to the colour, range

vibrancy of this set, and the Under the Sea number, where I particularly liked the jellyfish and octopus. However, it was the consistently high standard of costume across 34 different production numbers that was remarkable, **and** they all fitted so well (we thought the young policeman uniforms were a good example of this). Where there were “sets” such as the little girls in the Candyman/Perfect Young Ladies/Soul Bossa Nova, the outfits were beautifully co-ordinated, and in the big production numbers, the costume was used to highlight groupings. I particularly noted the consistent use of black characters for the girls, and the fact that all shoes were clean and shiny. Where wigs were used, they were appropriate to the number and well dressed, and the variation in make up also added to the overall presentation.

LIGHTING/SOUND:

For a review, the stage was always colourful and interesting, and overall, the lighting was of a very high standard. There were some excellent effects created during this production, some very simple as in the synchronised swimming or Bossa Nova, and others more complex (Under the Sea/ A letter from Charlie Bucket/Almost Nearly Perfect) which added to the atmosphere of individual production numbers.

The sound was at times a little inconsistent, with feedback from the rifle mikes, and a fading in and out sometimes evident.

MUSIC

The small music ensemble added enormously to the overall standard of the evening. Always well balanced with the singers, they produced a remarkably rounded sound under the direction of Thomas Duchan, setting a clear tempo in the big chorus numbers, and sensitively accompanying many of the solos, giving additional support where necessary. The chorus diction was excellent, as it was for most of the soloists. However pitch was quite variable, most notably in the opening number, where soloists were perhaps nervous and needed time to settle. Possibly doubling up on solo lines might help?

CHOREOGRAPHY

There was a wide range of dance styles evident here and appropriately choreographed to the capabilities and ages of the different groups of performers. We particularly liked Lollipop, and Happy. For the major production numbers, the stage was always busy, and generally exuded high energy, and the Cups song (You're gonna miss me when I'm gone) was sharp and extremely well done. The Bossa Nova number had some lovely Fosse choreography, with the moves generally well executed, but sometimes needing a little more sharpness on occasion.

Movement in the small group numbers such as She Went and Lost It reflected precision and excellent attention to detail, while in Zorba the sheer enthusiasm of the performers covered a multitude of sins! Pauline Roast's characterisation of Charlie Chaplin was a delight.

DIRECTION

Michelle Bacon is to be congratulated on pulling together a very entertaining and varied evening. Organising evenings like this are almost more demanding than a scripted production or musical, as each number is a production in itself. There was a clear sense of a team approach – the music, choreography, costume and technical side all worked so well together, and that is an excellent reflection on the director's skills.

Overall the programme was excellent, with a tremendous amount of variety in each half (perhaps one sketch too many in each half?). Thematically grouping the seaside/lollipop numbers worked extremely well, as it allows the audience to build some sense of continuity. However, I'm afraid that we both felt that the Swan Lake section of the finale number was in the wrong place in the programme, as it caused the pace to drop, and seemed to be a poor fit with the rest of the material.

Not everything was perfect (when is it ever!). Although the vocals and dancing in Sur le Plage were excellent, some of the blocking meant that the men were masked for a significant part of the song. The blocking in Perfect Young Ladies also created masking on occasion – but this may have been more down to individuals getting out of place than the direction.

Some of the sketches lost their humour due to lack of pace, or occasionally poor diction or lack of words, and on occasion, there was a failure to find a means to engage with the audience.

PERFORMANCES:

In a production such as this, it is impossible to review everybody individually, so if I haven't mentioned you individually, then please don't be offended!

Jenny Hornett's diction was excellent in her Act 1 monologue, and her sense of humour made this monologue very entertaining.

James Bacon and Jack Williams made us giggle a lot with their synchronised swimming number

Graham Pipe featured in a number of the sketches – he worked hard in each, whether the dancing of Zorba the Greek, or the great facial expressions in the well scripted AndyPandy sketch.

Jenny, Graham and Jack performed my favourite sketch of the evening – Crosswords. Their timing was excellent, and the whole piece was well paced, as was Graham and Jack's 'Blackberry' sketch.

The Perfect Young ladies were lovely to look at and worked extremely well as a team, as did the group of She Went and Lost It.

Jenson Bacon's two solo numbers were expressively delivered. I preferred "Almost Perfect" where his good musical sense, together with expressive delivery and controlled dynamics made this a nicely polished performance.

We also thought that the monologue A Computer's Swallowed Grandma was clearly delivered in a very engaging way (not sure whether this was Cedar or Jenny on the Friday that we were there).

I also enjoyed listening to James Bacon, (but felt that more was needed in terms of "putting the number over"). Slight issues with pitch at the ends of phrases would probably be overcome by working on developing breath control.

Colin Bellett gave a very rounded sound in Candy Man and Smile (where he was ably supported by Pauline Roast), but lacked a little pace in his cricketing monologue.

IN CONCLUSION

Well – the evening was entitled SMILE, and smile we did. When performers are committed and obviously enjoying themselves, it gives a production a 'bounce', and this was evident on the Friday night performance. Of its genre, this revue demonstrated strong production values, and provided the opportunity for performers of all ages and interests to participate and develop skills and confidence. It was a very enjoyable evening.

Thank you for the opportunity to offer comment.

Dawn King
Adjudicator