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Production :
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Report by :

PHEOS Musical Players
"Follies"
14th May 2009
Watersmeet Theatre
Tony Austin

Report

Is there any other musical to challenge "Follies" for its complications in thought and action? The fantasy of the celebration of a pre-war series of fantastically glamorous revues by their former participants on the eve of the demolition of the theatre where they took place (all being shadowed by the ghosts of their former selves) contrasting with the more modern angst of two of their number and their respective husbands, and that angst being worked out at the end through the further fantasy of a Follies performance of a series of individual numbers spanning the whole gamut of the Follies genre but augmented by the extra sophistication in both words and music which only one author could provide.

Congratulations to Director CLIVE BEBEE, Musical Director PETER ALLANSON, Choreographer HOLLY STRAWSON and the AUGMENTED PHEOS COMPANY for achieving the glamour, a believable assemblage of former Follies performers with hard-working younger players and dancers as the ghosts, a superb quartet of leads to put over the senses of nostalgia and angst, a faultless orchestra, and exemplary use of the stage both informally and formally in the routines, many with mass movement set and brilliantly accomplished across the whole age range of the cast.

Glamour is surely the first essential, and while the stage of a disused theatre is unlikely to provide it, we were happy to believe that its lighting equipment was untouched (and indeed superbly modern), so that steep and stark stairways of the set by GRADAV LTD with the help of only a small glitter curtain could be transformed by ANDREW BIRD of AB Lighting in any number of ways with the most glorious combination of colours, gobos and moving lights, focusing our attention on a relevant conversation, spotlighting one performer while others were in silhouette, or flooding the stage with celebratory brightness or with colour washes from the subtle to the voluptuous, particularly when the shade was deep purple.

Costumes under Wardrobe Mistress SYLVIE HARDING were equally sumptuous from the wonderful evocations of the real Follies' Girls with more material in the headdresses than the costumes, through the sets of greys for the men and white pocket-handkerchief dresses for the ladies in the final fantasies (hired from Triple C's costumes) to the evening wear provided by members themselves, with especial mention of dresses worn by ladies which had previously added glamour to the dame in a local group's pantomimes.

Stage dressing with minimal space involved mainly some elegant chairs, efficiently moved and cleared by the cast, and a very bijou white baby grand, whose glamour was unfortunately lost without a proper height stool. Props by ROSALIND MOSS seemed properly unobtrusive, or obtrusive where intended. And the skill of the SOUND design and operation, uncredited in the programme, kept almost every word audible, the only exceptions being some of the many necessarily unmiked single line contributions to "Loveland".

Then another flight of fancy we were happy to accept: that the revue performers coming back "Tonight" (as the programme said, presumably to avoid quibbles about the authenticity of the "modern" dress) to celebrate the shows from the twenties and thirties, were not all actual or near centenarians. Although there was at least one octogenarian among the soloists, ages were played much more as they would have been in the original 1971 setting. Their gradual assembly as party guests while the band played, allowing us to be introduced to some we needed to identify later, was achieved with elegant naturalness before a sudden blackout (gasps!) and Dimitri Weissman (MOSHE FILIP) was spotlit at the top of the rostra. Evidently not based on Florenz Ziegfeld, his gentle, modest, old-fashioned welcome clearly set the scene for anyone who hadn't read their programme, while his later brief appearances were well put over in character, as was his closing announcement.

ROSS CARTER as Roscoe showed off his top notes in “Beautiful Girls”, although without a top hat to take off he was not as flamboyant as some interpreters, later becoming completely self-effacing as the pianist and an occasional chorus member. With superb pictures and lighting, that number was a great showpiece: the men joining in, the ladies parading elegantly down the steep walkways, and the company beautifully posed for the final verse, a full-throated anthem with glorious orchestral accompaniment.

Further nostalgic entertainments followed, with, SYLVIA PARK and VIC GOLDING charmingly putting across the little song and dance routine remembered from their youth in “Rain on the Roof”, JANET PEARSON keeping her French accent under control so I heard words I had not heard before in her saucy “Ah Paree”, and JOSIE MATTHEWS scoring as always with the show-stopping “Broadway Baby”, while the audience seemed to wish they were not a medley and they could applaud each individually. (The “Bolero d’Armour” shown in the programme, perhaps mercifully in view of that spelling, didn’t seem to exist.) The first half was brought to a triumphant close, and the second Act started, by FAITH McINNES’s super rendition of the Mirror Song “Who’s That Woman” (“Whose” in the programme!) which developed into a great ensemble tap dance for all the ladies as firstly led by Faith and then by Choreographer HOLLY STRAWSON as her younger self bursting through with the other FOLLIES GIRLS, with their increased tapping rate mirrored by not a few of their older selves.

Extra treats came in the second half with JACKIE O’ROURKE’s expressive and meaningful “I’m Still Here”, although she hardly looked old enough to have heard of the Dionne quins even in 1971, and CHRISTINE ANSON and her younger self ELISE WHEATLEY duetting above the stave in the lovely (and so un-Sondheim-like) operetta waltz-song “One More Kiss”. There were also many odd lines of dialogue in the crowded party setting but Direction always ensured we were looking in the right place for them, while those mentioned, along with PAM ALLANSON, KATE GLOZIER, KARINA GOVINDJI, DAVE EVANS and LES BROUDE among others, always remembered their widely spaced cues, and ensured that their words and characters came across clearly.

The contribution of all seven FOLLIES GIRLS cannot be overstated, whether forming a ghostly presence above the stage, climbing elegantly down the difficult steps with their heads held high so as not to overbalance their amazing headdresses, weaving between the real people on the stage without causing collisions to break the illusion or joining in or leading as dancers in so many numbers. And when from among them came MELANIE RISEAM and ALICE INGHAM as Young Sally and Young Phyllis, often needed to shadow their older selves in modern dress, their dressing room must have been a nightmare. With RAY RACKHAM and IAIN DOUGHTY as Young Buddy and Young Ben, they constantly had to be ready for (usually short) entrances with possibly no words, or words echoed from others and moves which a real person would not make, all of which they performed remarkably while mirroring the character of their older selves. Introduced to us through their minor parts in “Waiting for the Girls Upstairs” it was good that they got rewarded for their talent and hard work with the take-off of the contrapuntal Follies songs Irving Berlin used to write “You’re Gonna Love Tomorrow/Love Will See Us Through” charmingly performed.

You need to be an actor to perform almost any Sondheim number and PHEOS had assembled four exceptional actors to play the leads, with the result that the angst-ridden dialogue always rang true as did the listeners’ reactions. To add to that both ladies were trained and accomplished singers and both men knew how to put over a song, and every word they sang came over as clearly as the dialogue. Each of them needed to show the effect of drink as the evening progressed and each did it with subtlety and in character.

I can’t list all their separate virtues, but STEVE BROWN as Buddy made a super hick salesman and gave his all with two wonderful solo acts, the anguished “The Right Girl” and its Follies send-up “Buddy’s Blues”, in which his non-stop vaudeville act with comic walks and impressions would have won ecstatic applause from his idol, David Healy the original London Buddy, as it did from us.

TRISH LEWIS put over Sally's over-excitement and her infatuation with Ben convincingly in "No, Don't Look at Me" maintaining it through the beautifully sung "In Buddy's Eyes" and on until her drunken announcement and her shock at Ben's response, making her superb "Losing My Mind" in the Follies section even more poignant.

SUE REYNOLDS as Phyllis excelled with her portrait of a rich, embittered woman unable to control her tongue, with her quarrel so realistic that "I don't suppose you play the drums" to her pick-up was not a laugh line. "Could I Leave You" was really vitriolic, with the final "Guess!" spat out perfectly, and her Follies tongue-twister analysing her problems a lovely contrast superbly put over and danced stylishly with the men.

As Ben, JEVAN MORRIS showed all the skills of an ex-diplomat, with the practised calm exterior mostly hiding his insecurities about the "ex" and other things until Phyllis or others touched a raw spot. As always, his dialogue and reactions were exemplary and, although some earlier solo singing needed more lyricity, his "Live, Laugh, Love", sung while his character was really losing his mind, was a masterpiece.

I've already mentioned the fine quality of the orchestra under MD PETER ALLANSON but have probably not said enough about the quality of the singing or the complete confidence with which it was put over by principals and ensemble alike, signs of thorough coaching and preparation.

Director CLIVE BEBEE'S skill in obtaining the wonderful principal performances and the brilliantly varied use of the stage by them and the ensemble is impossible to put into words; I see I haven't praised the freezes or the way that ensemble seemed able to make itself invisible when onstage behind action which we needed to watch; but everything in the complicated show seemed superbly plotted and everyone rehearsed to a "T".

And as for HOLLY STRAWSON's choreography, I haven't mentioned "Loveland" or the ensembles following it; equally well worked out and executed by everyone as in the earlier numbers, it took us really back to the days when spectacular revues with glamorously clad ladies and glorious singing ensembles were called "Follies".

Apart from saying thank you to SMs ANDY TAYLOR and JO WILLIAMS and all the others responsible for back stage and preparatory work, to RAY RACKHAM for his programme note on the show's history (I had almost convinced myself that I must have missed the difference in status between Phyllis and Sally when I saw the 1987 London production, and am happy to be told it was written out of that version) and to CHRIS WORRALL for the invitation, the welcome and the hospitality, I hope I need add no more than that your production was so superb that my wife and I returned as paying audience members for the Saturday matinee and once more enjoyed the experience thoroughly. Our congratulations and thanks to all concerned!

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