



Society : Crowthorne Musical Players
Production : Made In Dagenham, The Musical
Date : Saturday 18th March
Venue : South Hill Park
Report by : Terry Hunt

[Show Report](#)

Made In Dagenham, The Musical, being about a miscellany of ordinary folk of all ages and backgrounds, is ideally suited to the relatively random membership of Amateur Dramatic Societies. That said, a group of female factory workers striking for equal pay, perhaps isn't an obvious subject of choice for an entertaining musical, however Richard Bean's book and Richard Thomas's lyrics set to the music of David Arnold is inspiring, motivating, humorous, insightful, touching, and thoroughly entertaining.

The book, based on true events, pulls few punches and is presented in such a way that even Disney won't be able to turn it into a Fairy Tale. This is a very real story, presented with the gritty, coarseness it needs to make it credible.

For my first visit to a CMP production, 'I doff my cap' to Director **Mark Connolly**, his production team and a very talented troupe of performers, for an outstanding show.

As a whole, MID had a level of slickness not often seen in amateur production. Everything...lines, music, lighting, scenes...all flowed smoothly and effortlessly, keeping the pace up and the audience's attention.

I very much appreciate that it is a team effort, be it the cast, musicians, tech team, stage crew, props or wardrobe, but credit must go to Mark for bringing his vision together with such an homogenized result.

Rather than repeat myself, credit goes to Mark for his part when working with the various departments, as detailed.

Staging a musical, set in as many varying locations as MID, on a budget, is never going to be easy. However **Victoria Spearing**'s design served the purpose well. I was particularly pleased to see the kitchen truck pre-set...ready for breakfast. It was well equipped with the latest mod con's of a late 60's kitchen, providing an ideal backdrop to the opening scene.

From then on, settings revolved around furniture placed on the fore-stage or one of the upstage levels.

I very much liked the varying levels, as it helped focus attention on the relevant activity. Be it a Union office, Prime Ministers office, the Hopkins' dining room or somewhere in the USA, with the simple exchange of a dartboard to a painting, etc, all these scenes felt like they were 'somewhere', rather than a random, non specific place.

The raised levels we also well utilised for bringing characters into scenes, whilst keeping their remoteness..in particular when Eddie was singing the words of his letter to Rita.

Whilst mentioning that scene, it's a shame the kitchen truck wasn't used again, for two reasons. 1. It was very good, and 2. seeing Rita sitting at the family table...alone, after previously seeing it as part of a busy family scene, would have given just as much as sense of being alone, as the table in a spotlight.

Only 'Eastbourne' could have really done with something more to depict a seaside town. Maybe a projected image of the pier stretching out into the sea, and a couple of deck chairs about the stage. However, on the whole, the set was solid, and worked well as a multifunctional space.

Hat's off too, to S.M. **Ian Robertson**, ably supported by DSM **Becky Wire**, **Andy Springford** and **Bob Swann** for an extremely smooth running show. Although aware of 'things' going on in the background, it wasn't distracting in the slightest. I'm assuming the cast assisted with the frequent resetting of furniture going on behind performers, and only once did I very briefly notice someone who wasn't one of the cast, on stage, but it all worked perfectly in keeping a seamless flow from start to finish.

In terms of colour, the staging was quite uninteresting in itself, so it did lend itself to being lifted quite well by **Michael Brenkley's** lighting design. For 50% of the audience, looking down onto a vast expanse of black floor, using rich, broken colours, window Gobo's etc, all added to the scene setting, and moving us from place to place, nicely.

The general states were appropriately warm for homes and offices, as opposed the starkness of the factory floor. Everyone was well lit - when they needed to be, with no patchiness, or unnecessary spill. Scene by scene, LX did well to highlight the action, and not pick out those moving furniture/scenery behind, so it all worked extremely well.

Although the projections helped out with references to Cromwell, etc, I feel they didn't add much, and the cyc (I assume it was the cyc as opposed to a specially placed screen?) was grey from the ambient light, for most of the show. Where possible, it would have been beneficial to either have a hint of colour, or cover it with the black tabs, when not in use.

I get the impression **Steve Davies** had a lot of LX cues to contend with! The entire show seemed to consist of one slow cross fade into another. I'm sure it wasn't like that at all, but from the audience perspective, we just seemed to 'arrive' in a new lighting state without noticing. For MOST of the performance, this worked well and felt effortless. There were a couple of occasions, however, it felt a little too slow. One particular time being when Rita marched on stage to find the letter. She was pretty much at the table, already speaking, before she was lit. All in all however, LX did a great job in design, rig and operation.

In all, **Tim Horrox's** sound design, operated by **Chris Nicholson**, was well balanced and of an ideal volume, enveloping the audience nicely, without becoming uncomfortable. Orchestra, soloists and female ensemble pieces were all very clear however the male 'chorus' were a bit muddied, so maybe cutting some of the bottom end of the EQ would have helped with clarity.

Although not exactly hidden or disguised, I was pleased that the radio mics weren't on display like beacons, and there did seem to be an awful lot. Chris did very well to keep a tab on them, with only one noticeably late cue in amongst the nice touches, such as the frying SFX in the opening

scene/sewing machines whirring etc and the reverb of the club comedian's mic. The overall volume was a bit too loud during 'Cortina Man', drowning out some dialogue between Sandra and Mr Hopkins, but otherwise, very well done.

Nothing says 'Ford factory worker' like Ford blue boiler suits and overalls, which must have been something of a blessing for **Janet Winn**, given such a large cast to dress. I was pleased to see the overalls weren't worn uniformly!

Much as every era has its fashions, the majority of working class men didn't really buy into it until after the 60's, so it's possible to be a bit more generic with men's clothes....which probably explains why I recall so few specifics about the men's costumes. Certainly nothing stood out for the wrong reason, but it was good to see characters such as Monty in a collar and tie under his overalls, befitting his slightly elevated status, and Harold Wilson in his unmistakable Gannex coat.

Ladies 60's fashion...the hemline in particular... is a different matter. Again, with such a large cast, it's difficult to make observations about every costume, but certainly the principle characters were well fitted out with a varied selection of bold patterned shift dresses, popular in the late 60's, through to more sober, practical wear. The overall 'look' was extremely authentic, however one problem of mini skirts/dresses is that footwear is fully exposed, and it was rather obvious that many of the females were all wearing the same (or very similar) black character shoes. The style in itself is ok for the period, however being all the same, and looking new, they did stand out. More of a variation, in the lead characters at least, may have worked better.

When Tooley first appeared in army fatigues, flanked by 2 rifle toting flunkies, I thought the idea that he'd been out 'huntin' an' a shoot'n' was quite funny, however, despite the reference to the Ford Hunger March, I do feel that as a business man, by the time he'd reached the UK, he'd have been wearing something a BIT less casual, and lost the rifles.

In all though, the overall look of the show was undeniably 60's , so well done Janet.

Presumably, while Janet was lost under a pile of costumes for months on end, **Peter Winn** had plenty of time to source/make some very authentic looking props! The opening kitchen scene in particular...from the Cannon (?) cooker, Formica table and down to the 60's design Cornflake packet...it took me right back to my childhood. Period, headlined newspapers, shows how much attention Peter gave to the details...and with good amateur companies, such detail make the difference. The protest placards were clearly cardboard when the backs were visible. Although unlikely, I suppose there's nothing to say that they wouldn't have been cardboard, however painting the back the same colour as the front, would have avoided drawing attention, but in all, excellent work by Peter.

Made In Dagenham is unlikely to become known as a musical for big dance routines, however, choreographer **Erin Hope Pharo** just about got the right level of dance content for the nature of the show. Lots of relatively simple company movement, impeccably timed, worked to great effect. The fluid, natural interaction between characters during 'Busy Woman', combined with the sharpness of the 'women' (Click, Click, Whirr, section) got things off to a great start.

Even the men, many of whom I suspect are not naturally gifted dancers, got the timing right in their routines, even if their styles varied slightly, although this added to the overall effect brilliantly.

I loved the signature dance moves from the 60's incorporated into the scene while singing about 'Pay Day', and the exploitative cheesiness of 'Cortina'.

My only question mark is over the use of the dancers during This Is America. The whole 'strong arm military' theme didn't work for me, and seemed out of place. (I felt it didn't work in the West End version, either). Perhaps some supercilious, American Flag waving would have been more appropriate?

Erin should be congratulated for not overcomplicating the choreography unnecessarily. It's not a 'dance' show as such, and it would have been wrong to try and make it one. As it is, choreography for the majority of the company was well performed with great timing, featuring the occasional vignette, elegantly delivered by 'the dancers' where needed. Excellent!

Also excellent were the orchestra, led by Musical Director, **Mark Webb**. It's not the first time I've said this, but I feel the ladies and gentlemen of the orchestra are often unsung heroes in musical theatre productions. When played as skilfully and cleanly as this was (to my fairly untrained ear), it's very easy to take the orchestra/music for granted. Well done to **Mark, Charlotte, Caitlin, Paul, Patrick, Nick, Steve, Ben** and **Doug** for such an accomplished performance. I really don't like to single anyone out as I am only too aware that synergy is a key factor in the success of a good orchestra, but I would like to give a special mention to **Steve Fawbert's** excellent, emotive, drumming!

Vocal harmonies for the duets and company numbers were skilful and polished. With Mark's guidance and the cast's collective talent, musically, this show was pretty faultless!

Laura Thain appeared totally at ease on stage as Rita O'Grady, clearly delivering her lines effortlessly and transitioning into song so smoothly...all the time, changing gear to hurry the children along, patronise her husband, chat with the girls on the factory floor or stepping up to the mark to fight the women's corner. With a fabulous and versatile singing voice, Laura is a truly talented individual, who looked the part and did herself, and CMP, proud.

Playing the character of Eddie O'Grady, a man's man, forced into the role of being a house husband way before the term was invented, was expertly performed by **Eddie Spencer**. Like the character of Rita, Eddie too, is constantly changing gear to be one of the lads, a Father and loyal husband - despite the challenges to all that he understands of their relationship. Whereas things evolve quite chronologically for Rita, the character of Eddie has far more subtle, confusing emotions to deal with, which (actor) Eddie pitched just right.

You know you've got it right when there's a moment of silence at the end of 'The Letter', before the outburst of enthusiastic applause! Spot on!

Laura and Eddie looked good together and were believable as young couple with a family. Interaction between them was natural and true. The 60's Essex accent (different to the current Essex accent) was consistent, and well done for keeping it up throughout the songs, when accents are so often dropped. I particularly enjoyed 'I'm Sorry I love you'.

An accomplished performance by both.

Angie Chitty's 'Connie' is the sort of reliable, unfussy woman who generally takes life in her stride. Standing tall, with hands firmly planted in overall pockets, just about sums up Connie. In Angie's performance, it's quite clear Connie has 'seen it all before', and as a catalyst to Rita's fight, gave a stirring rendition of 'Same Old Story'.

I did think Connie looked a bit too healthy when in hospital, but other than that, a solid performance.

Union Shop Steward 'Monty' is a kind man, with a few underlying issues to deal with. **Mike Hills** had good 'lads' banter with Union Brothers, Bill (**Peter Winn**) and Sid (**Dave Collier**), navigated the middle ground between management and 'the women' well, and sensitively handled the loss of Monty's secret love, Connie, without being overly sentimental. A well performed, supporting role...which sums Monty up!

The girls in the 4 main machinist roles, working with Rita, were a lovely team, all appearing comfortable in their characters, and with each other. With everyone clear and audible in the dialogue exchanges, it is very easy to believe that the girls (inc Rita) work with each other, day in, day out, discussing the trivia of life as they machine away.

Lisa Bennett (Beryl) is the mistress of the throw away line (ie 'Zip Goes' in reference to Barbara Castle's C&A dress) and swears so naturally, she makes it an (almost) acceptable part of everyday language. In taking the mic from Cubby Chuff, it was just like watching the shenanigans of a girls night out. A very confident performance.

Caroline Webb's character, Scouser Cass, wants more from life than to be a factory machinist, and Cass's dissatisfaction with her lot comes across in Caroline's performance...in a good way. Not the most visible of Rita's colleagues, but Cass looked suitably fired up by events as they unfolded.

You've got to love Clare, played by **Catherine Hazell**. Forerunner to the latter-day stereotypical Essex Girl, Catherine gave an expressive, well paced, performance, especially notable in the very wordy (and funny) 'Wosname'. A particularly good accent...and nice to hear it without 'like' after every other word! "Do I make myself clear?" (made me laugh!)

Emma Carver looked great, decked out in white, bringing a bit of 60's glamour to the stage. The fashion conscious, slightly scatty Sandra, probably has less in common with the rest of the girls, hence her lapse in loyalty in favour of earnings! A bubbly performance, with underlying subtleties made through telling expressions, especially when challenged over her acceptance of promotional work.

All 4 girls worked well together, which was evident even when in the background, such as when lending their tight, vocal harmonies to Rita's beautiful, heartfelt rendition of We Nearly Had it all. The 4 girls, upstage, in semi darkness, slowly lowering their heads in unison at the end of the song. It's a small point, but is the type of attention to detail I particularly enjoyed about their combined performance.

The prize for the best timed pause in the show, goes to **Andy Camichel**, as Harold Wilson. It takes skill to walk into a 'cupboard', close the door and then perfectly time the pause, before delivering a cracking line! Andy's satirical portrayal of the former Prime Minister was made all the more amusing by being surprisingly light on his feet. With great pace and humour in his line delivery, this was a wonderfully accomplished and enjoyable performance.

Jenny Green's upright posture and striding, assured gait was befitting the characterisation of Barbara Castle, a woman in a man's world. Although not a major issue, Jenny is clearly too young for the role as Barbara, who would have been in her late 50's. The hair was about right, but maybe less flattering make up would have helped. Jenny has a great voice and delivered a rousing Ideal World with precision and power, however as a point of direction, I feel more of the song could have been addressed towards the girls, before taking centre stage to bring it home.

Dave Bennett as emotionally detached, stick in the mud, toff, Jeremy Hopkins, made a great pairing with **Ellen Killington's** Lisa Hopkins, the dutiful stay at home wife with brains. You could see why this couple would have ended up as husband and wife in the 50's or 60's, with their matching accents and privileged backgrounds. In today's world, it's unlikely Lisa would bother with someone like Jeremy, let alone marry him. I was amused by Jeremy's well performed re-action to Tooley at the opening of act 2. Typically British reserve, and a cup of tea.

The nuances of Lisa's position was handled well by Ellen. Where Lisa's support of Rita could have come across as condescending, but instead, it felt very genuine.

Grace Winn and **Andrew Hills** as Sharon and Graham O'Grady, both gave very confident performance, joining in very loudly...and in time...with Busy Woman. They energetically went about their morning business without hesitation, and yet, when required to appear sad and missing their mum, Grace and Andrew showed their sadness in their body language and Andrew even took on the role of protective big brother. Very good performances from both. I didn't see a performance with **Eloise Barber**, however I have every confidence her performance was just as good.

Matt Thompson gave Tooley the brash, arrogant gusto needed for this role. Matt was fully committed to making This Is America as 'in your face' as should be. Despite not being keen on the ongoing Military theme connected to Tooley, Matt maintained a good, loud, accent. I feel that he appeared more like a sneaky, petulant child, when tearing up Rita's speech, whereas I don't think Tooley would have given a damn if anyone had seen him! A solid performance however.

John Caley was convincing as a swaggering, sexist club comedian. I'm not sure if a bit of dialogue was added, in order to cover the end scene change, but either way, it worked! **Damian Thomas** positively oozed nauseating cheese as Cortina Man, however he did forget to sing into the hand held mic a couple of times. Perhaps a prop mic wasn't rehearsed with?

Simon Light, Chris Wood and **Tony Collins** finish the line up of smarmy, condescending, lecherous and generally dislikeable men, who litter Dagenham. No doubt they were also part of the general ensemble, all of whom appeared to know exactly what they were doing, where they should be, and when.

I commend the entire cast for avoiding all too common bus queues..in fact it was something of a master-class of random scattering about the stage! At no point was I aware of lines of cast shuffling to get into the wings, which is quite remarkable given the numbers involved.

The ONLY time I thought things looked a bit untidy, was after the curtain call, which was a shame, but in the overall scheme of things, it appeared to be a very stage aware and disciplined cast!

My partner's first comment when handed the Programme was 'Oh...nice Programme'. It has a thoughtfully designed cover, with an industrial look, car badges, a number plate, and incorporates pictures from the real events of Dagenham. Containing appropriate articles and all the usually bio etc which you'd expect, I was pleased to see the two articles about wardrobe and props. I think it's good to remind the audience how much effort goes into putting on a production, as everything 'non performance' tends to get taken for granted and given little thought. One comment would be to avoid large amounts of small print. Many of us ageing souls struggle to read it in the dim auditorium lights!! Nice work **Simon Light**.

In summary, CMP has done wonderful work in staging Made In Dagenham as quality show, not just with some top class performances, but in the attention to detail across the whole production. Mark Connolly has done wonders to keep the action flowing smoothly and the pace of dialogue up, with so many changes of setting and such a large cast to manoeuvre. It looked and sounded, fabulous. Congratulations to you all and I very much look forward to future evenings in the company of CMP

Terry Hunt

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