

Society : Crowthorne Musical Players
Production : **CALAMITY JANE**
Date : Saturday 12th March 2016
Venue : South Hill Park, Wilde Theatre, Bracknell
Report by : Gordon Bird, NODA Representative, Area 14



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Show Report

I was delighted to be invited to review this wonderful musical which was adapted by Ronald Hammer & Phil Park from the stage play by Charles K, Freeman with lyrics from Paul Francis Webster and music by Sammy Fain. This is one of my favourite musicals having previously directed the show and even making an appearance in another production, some twenty years ago.

CMP's production continued with their recent high standards with some excellent singing, high energy dancing and well directed chorus scenes. The leading roles were appropriately cast and ably supported by very well-drilled chorus. With sumptuous costumes and sympathetic light the production team skilfully ensured a good evening all round.

CALAMITY JANE (LAURA THAIN)

What a wonderful performance by Laura in the main role. She commanded the stage and the scenes, with good strong singing and well defined characterisation. There were a few moments, particularly the cabin scene, that were not quite as strong, but overall this was a memorable performance by a good singer and actress. It is always difficult when the gun refuses to fire so it would have been useful to have had a contingency plan. As it was, the scene lost a little impact but with a plan-B in place, like horse whip maybe or standing on the bar and "hollerin", it may have worked. *Secret Love* was full of tenderness and her *Windy City* had all the energy and verve that the character merited. Overall this was undoubtedly a very polished performance by an extremely talented young actress and I am sure whom we will see a lot more of in future.

WILD BILL HICKOK (DAVID BENNETT)

David started of the evening a little tentative but grew in confidence as the evening progressed. His singing was top notch, a lovely rich sound with excellent diction. *Higher Than Hawk* was superb, tender and soft and we really felt his inner feelings. Be careful not to overplay the stance – I felt the stereotypical cowboy stance was overused and you could have used different poses to represent his demeanour. I would have also liked him to present more meanness in his attitude, to denote the "wild" in his name – David appeared a little too tame at times. However, the tenderness in *Secret Love* was presented just right and the chemistry in *I can do without you* was equally well portrayed and overall David provided an accomplished performance of Calamity's husband to be.

KATIE BROWN (CAROLINE SMEE)

Caroline produced a confident portrayal of Katie Brown, Adelaide's wardrobe assistant that makes it big in *Deadwood*. She tackled *Love You Dearly* with Danny very well indeed and her performance of *Keep It Under Your Hat* was appropriately presented – nervous to begin with but then gaining confidence the second time, but oh, I do wish you had a hat (even if you borrowed one of the

cowboys)! The tender moments with Danny looked natural but did wish there was more of a build up before accepting Danny's love. Overall this was a very well presented performance by an accomplished singer.

Lt DANNY GILMARTIN (NICK WILLIAMS)

I always feel sorry for anyone playing this part – Danny is so wet! However, given these constraints, Nick fulfilled this role very well and I loved the duet *Love You Dearly* which was wonderfully sung by both performers. I would have liked to have seen more angst between Danny and Bill in the cabin scene as the tension was not clear. The revelation of why Katie sent Bill out for the logs was far from clear and felt the line came out of no-where and needed some reason for the comment. Overall this was an adept performance by Nick as the love interest for both Calamity and finally, Katie.

HENRY MILLER (KEITH SULLIVAN)

I have had the pleasure of working with Keith before and have seen many of his recent performances and have long admired the enthusiasm and care he puts into his roles. The part of the grouchy, bad-tempered, flustered owner of the Golden Garter needs to be constantly at ill with the world – Deadwood's worst pessimist, the complete opposite to Susan's sunny disposition. Keith clearly worked effortlessly but felt that some of the dialogue was too rushed meaning that the frustration of his character was lost. I would like to have seen a bigger reaction to Francis's declaration at the end and the desperation of failure when Francis was not Frances and Adelaide Adams was revealed to be Katie Brown could also be exaggerated a lot more. Keith's confident singing was never in doubt and I liked the idea of him dismissing the dance.

FRANCIS FRYER (DAMIAN THOMAS)

The tendency could be to play the female impersonator a little camp, which Francis clearly is not, but fortunately in the hands of an expert like Damian, this was carefully yet wonderfully underplayed performance. The nervousness of character was spot on. His movement around the stage, particularly in *About the Weather* was well choreographed and delivered. His affection of Susan was played just right but the performance of *Hive Full of Honey* was very well indeed. Damian has a very clear and tuneful voice and given his dancing and acting skills, this role was perfectly performed.

SUSAN (KATIE LIGHT)

Katie depicted a lovely performance as Susan, Henry Miller's niece. She moved around the stage with composure and danced with assurance. Her relationship with Francis was nicely observed and these two worked well together.

ADELAIDE ADAMS (DEBBIE MANN)

The conceited prima-donna Adelaide Adams was well observed by Debbie Mann, although I would have liked to have seen a little bit more, especially when Katie asked about being in the chorus – the put down could have been delivered even more ruthlessly. Debbie's performance of *It's Harry I'm Planning to Marry* was excellent, and very well supported by the sycophantic ensemble. Movement was well defined. A lovely cameo role.

JOE (PETER WINN)

“DOC” PIERCE (JUSTIN FERRINGTON)

RATTLESNAKE (TONY COLLINS)

HANK (ASHLEIGH WELLS)

COLONEL, FORT SCULLY (SIMON LIGHT)

All of the smaller named roles added good characterisation to the production. Lines were learnt and delivered on cue with clarity and good volume. TONY was an excellent Rattlesnake, looking ever in an old-timer! SIMON provided an air of superiority as the Fort Colonel and PETER was an efficient barman. JUSTIN’s doctor was perfectly morose and crotchety although a little quiet at times whilst ASHLEIGH was clear and precise as the scout, Hank. I loved the way he was constantly interrupted so could not get his story out! A good piece of subtle direction.

CAN-CAN GIRLS

The girls added energy to their scenes – with some excellent dances that used the stage well. Each of the girls had a character, which was nice to see, and they reacted well to the scenes going on around them. All of the dances looked well rehearsed but did feel that there was some blocking (mainly because of the restricted area in which to dance). It is always difficult when you move from rehearsal space to the stage but did feel that some of the moves needed a small element of adjustment. Otherwise, the girls dances were of a high standard and oh my, those costumes were excellent!

STAGE DOOR JOHNNIES (SIMON LIGHT, MATT THOMPSON, ASHLEIGH WELLS, CHRIS WOOD)

These four men supported Adelaide Adams in the song *It’s Harry I’m Planning to Marry* very well. Their singing was nicely balanced and the movement was well rehearsed added to what could have been a very static scene.

ENSEMBLE

It was good to see that each member had a clear character that was maintained throughout the production.

DIRECTOR (MARK CONOLLY)

There were some additional pieces that were added that I thought worked very well and was appropriate to the character of the show. I felt a couple of the scenes were a little rushed, the “cabin scene”, for example, seemed to be a little rushed and would have liked a few pauses for effect – especially at the moment when Katie and the Lieutenant fall in love. I would have also liked a little more time for when the horses are heard before the characters enter – I am sure those horses were not tied up! These are small points, and appreciate a personal point of view. Overall the direction was tight, at high pace with everyone knowing exactly what they were doing. Entrances and exits were well thought out and the chorus movement was natural and clearly defined. The chorus all had good, strong, believable characters - which are not often found in amateur productions. One of the issues performing this time of year of course is the onset of seasonal colds and I understand that this production was no different so the cast can be congratulated in continuing in the true “the show must go on” spirit.

MUSICAL DIRECTOR (JAMES MANWARING)

The musical delivery of this production was excellent. All of the principals knew their roles and sung skilfully and with precision. There were a few errors on the night, particularly in the Cabin Scene, but I am sure if I saw another evening it would have been perfect! The opening number was full of vigour and overall the chorus supported the main roles very well. The balance of voices was very effective, particularly in *Black Hills of Dakota* and *Windy City* and *The Deadwood Stage*. The harmonies in *Adelaide* with Bill and the Men were performed very well. Did you change the tempo of *Black Hills of Dakota* as it seemed a little quicker than I remembered it to be? This was not an issue and worked very well and liked the addition of movement to the song. The orchestra was nicely balanced and never over powered the singers, although some of the underscoring could have done with some microphone support as the dialogue was a little quiet.

CHOREOGRAPHY (ERIN HOPE PHARO)

Overall the choreography was well drilled with all of the dancers knowing what they were doing. Movement was well thought out and filled the stage very well. I did feel that some of the can-can dance routines were a little blocked – probably as a result moving from the rehearsal room to stage. It did not disappoint the effect or the overall performance but something to note in future. I thought the use of different levels (for *Windy City*, for example) was excellent, using every part of the stage (including the top of the bar!) I liked the addition of some dance movement in *Black Hills of Dakota*, this added interest to what can be quite a long song!

STAGE MANAGER (IAN ROBERTSON)

DEPUTY STAGE MANAGER (DUNCAN BRUCE)

The stage was expertly managed with quick scene changes the kept the pace of the production flowing very well. There was a small gap in between the black tabs and the edge of the set thus allowing a small unwanted peak backstage. Someone clearly noticed this and quickly re-positioned the tabs. There was one scene change that was a little noisy but overall, the changes were prompt and efficient.

WARDROBE (JANET WINN)

On the way to the theatre I was discussing the need to ensure that the appropriate undergarments are used to avoid any embarrassing on stage scenes. It was rather uncanny that one young unfortunate can-can dancer experienced an unwanted wardrobe malfunction but all credit to her, as she managed to recover the situation calmly and almost un-noticed. All I can say on this subject, as I do to any performer who has a lot of activity on stage is to ensure that all under garments offer the correct support. Overall, the costumes were stunning! The can-can dancers in particular looked wonderful. All of the costumes looked appropriate to the period and all seem to fit the performers perfectly. I would have liked Calamity's dress to be a more of a mess when she returns from the crick, perhaps even with a tear, as it was difficult to pick out the mud on her dress under the lights.

PROPERTIES & FURNISHINGS (PETER WINN)

SHOW WEEK PROPS ASSISTANT (MAXINE ROBINSON)

The properties looked appropriate to the period. They all seemed to be in place as the right time and moved off stage without any fuss. I was delighted to see that bottles and glasses had liquid, as this is one of my bugbears!

LIGHTING DESIGN (MICHAEL BRENKLEY)

I loved the use of colours, with the gorgeous custard, golden yellow as the backdrop. The lighting wash was very good with all areas of the stage equally well lit so that all performers could be adequately seen. The different scenes (Adelaide's dressing room, the cabin, the fort) in front were well thought out and equally well lit.

LIGHTING OPERATOR (STEVE DAVIES)

All of the lighting cues were executed on time. It was a shame that Calamity and Bill could not have waited a second or so longer for the blackout after she had fainted in the cabin as that would have been more effective.

SOUND (TOM HORROX)

Although there appeared to be a couple of microphone issues this did not affect the overall quality show as all of the principals were at the right level and was balanced well with each other and the orchestra. It is always a difficult decision whether to go for sound effect or use a live gun effect – fine with the gun fires but not so when they do not. We had a couple of mis-fires on this evening but I would still prefer the live sound rather than a recording anytime so the right decision was made.

MAKEUP (LINDA PEACOCK)

All of the performer's faces could be clearly seen under the lighting. All of the makeup was appropriate to the period and setting. I would have liked to have seen some of the character (Hank and Calamity in the opening scene, for example) a little more dishevelled, perhaps with dirt on their faces.

STAGE DESIGN (VICTORIA SPEARING)

Local theatre companies are extremely fortunate to have Victoria's wonderful vision at their disposal as her set designs are stunning. The golden garter bar was sturdy to support a number of dances and the staircase added height to the stage. All of these items looked very well constructed. The "stage" looked appropriate and liked the idea it doubled up as Adelaide's dressing room. The cabin interior moved into place quietly and effortlessly (at least it looked that way!)

PROGRAMME

The twenty four page programme was of a very high quality and hope CMP consider entering it for the poster and programme competition. The photographs, a mixture of colour and black and white, were of a high quality and good size that could clearly visible. The biographies were interesting to read. I enjoyed reading the additional articles regarding Calamity Jane and Sarsaparilla. I also enjoyed the costume, props and wardrobe design articles that shows how much research and effort that goes into a production. Quite often the backstage elements to the production are overlooked so this was a good idea.

Overall this was another well rehearsed, well cast and well sung show by this local group and I thank them for their kind invitation and I cannot wait to see their version of *Made in Dagenham* next year.

A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to read 'Gordon Bird', with a large, stylized flourish at the end.

Gordon Bird
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