



Society : Crowthorne Musical Players
 Production : Annie Get Your Gun
 Date : Thursday 25 May 2006
 Venue : The Wilde Theatre, South Hill Park, Bracknell
 Report by : Kim Halliday, Regional Rep.
 London Area 14

Report

Once again, I would like to start by thanking Crowthorne Musical Players (CMP) for inviting me to review this production. I've seen 'Annie...' a couple of times before, but on both occasions the production has been staged in a village or community hall. I was therefore looking forward to seeing it performed at a much larger venue.

PETER GREEN & MELINDA BENNETT (Dolly Tate & Charlie Davenport). *Dolly Tate* is one of musical theatre's most well-loved and comical characters and Melinda did her great justice tonight. One usually sees *Dolly* as a ditsy hapless drunk, but **Melinda** had steered away from this stereotype and gave us a wonderfully arrogant and feisty young woman, proving a good match for the tempestuous *Annie*. However, I don't think it worked to constantly stick out your bottom to indicate drunkenness – with the large bustle it looked very unflattering and unnatural! **Peter** gave us a credible performance as the Wild West Show's advance manager, looking extremely at ease on stage and with a convincing American accent. He was also in fine voice and proved to be something of a mover during the Wild West Dance. Two very good supporting performances.

LAURA GOSDEN & DAVID BENNETT (Annie Oakley & Frank Butler). I'm seriously running about of things to say about Laura and Dave as they are both such multi-talented individuals who bring a lot of energy and enthusiasm to the roles they portray. They also pair up together extremely well, and – probably because of their frequent pairing in the past – look at ease in each other's company. Tonight, **Laura** was the gun-toting wildcat *Annie Oakley* and once again, she'd got her characterisation off to a tee, giving us a pint-sized firecracker of a gal, whilst showing us *Annie's* tender side when she failed to get her 'Man with a Gun'. Her accent was spot-on and her singing a delight to the ear (and well done for holding that note in 'Anything You Can Do!' – very impressive!). **Dave** was once again cast in the role of 'romantic love-interest' cowboy *Frank Butler* and he carried off the role perfectly, putting me in mind of the classic good looks of a youthful Ronald Reagan (that's meant to be a compliment, by the way!). His strong tenor voice was easily able to cope with the score.

JOHN CALEY & MORRISON THOMAS (Buffalo Bill & Sitting Bull). **John** gave us a very commendable interpretation of one of Wild West's most colourful characters, although the facial hair and long grey wig did make him look a little like Billy Connolly! His American accent occasionally strayed back to his native dialect, but he more than made up for this with his commanding stage presence and powerful singing voice during 'There's No Business Like Show Business'. **Morrison** was aptly cast as *Chief Sitting Bull*, and his short stature and wonderful facial expressions, along with his deadpan delivery showed his natural flair for comedy. Another two good supporting roles.

MICHAEL HOLDEN, JADE NEAVE, AMY DILLON & ROBYN HEFFER (The Oakley Children: Little Jake, Nellie, Jessie & Minnie). The first thing I noticed about these children was how natural and relaxed they were on stage. They knew exactly what they were supposed to be doing and delivered their lines clearly and with good projection, exuding confidence well beyond their years. They also worked well together as a team, leaving us to believe they really were related. Definitely some stars to watch out for in the future!

ALEX AUCKEN, TONY KERSHAW & MALCOLM WINSLADE (Pawnee Bill, Foster Wilson & Mac). As three of the more minor supporting characters in the plot, **Alex**, **Tony** and **Malcolm** worked well within their roles, each adding their own individual touch. They were confident, projected well and maintained their characters throughout, which included some convincing American accents.

CHRIS WOOD, ROGER LANSDOWN & JOHN TAYLOR (Pawnee Bill's Messenger, Conductor & Footman). These were also three smaller, yet none-the-less important character roles and each of these gentlemen played their parts convincingly, with good projection and stage presence.

SUSANNE LEE, ROBIN ANDERSON, DANUSIA MALECZEK & HELEN NICHOLSON (Mrs Sylvia Potter-Porter, Mr & Mrs Adams & Mrs Henderson). Although these were some of the smaller named female roles, each was played very well, with lines delivered confidently and audibly. **Danusia** came over as the more natural of the actresses, although **Suzanne** gave a confident and comic portrayal of the 'faded Gibson Girl'.

ANGIE CHITTY & ANNE DARSLEY (Mrs Little Horse & Mrs Black Tooth) & JOHN BUTTERWORTH, GABY ANDERSON & PETER WINN (Indians). Another selection of mainly non-speaking characters, but I thought this quintet made very convincing Indians, with **Angie** in particular managing to wring as much comedy as she could from her role, through comical facial expressions and mannerisms.

BUFFALO BILL'S TROUPE (Katy Lethbridge, Jenny Rolls, Kayleigh Foord, Becky Pocock, Chris Wood, Jamie Heffer & Rory Hill). I thought these ladies and gents worked well together as a 'troupe' and all smiled and carried themselves as if they were real 'show' performers (which of course they are ... but you know what I mean!). The ladies in particular coped with some extremely complex high-kicking dance routines, and all looked confident on stage.

CHORUS OF TOWNSFOLK, GUESTS & CHILDREN, ETC.). Tonight's chorus were a mixed bunch of individuals of varying ages, but I thought they moved with purpose, and reacted well to the action taking place around them, enhancing the action as and when required, which is the whole purpose of a chorus. The children looked like they were having fun and were well-behaved when not part of the main action focus and all seemed able to cope with the movement given them. And well done to **Chris** for his spectacular rope-twirling act in the Wild West Show – which received a well-deserved round of applause!

DIRECTION (Mark Conolly). It's always difficult to inject something new into well-known family musicals, but I think Mark has done a commendable job tonight, providing us with a splendid evening's entertainment. The first secret of a musical's success is to assemble an appropriate cast, and Mark had probably chosen the best cast you could hope to assemble. The pace flowed well, the two leads were sensational, and the supporting cast worked well together, helping to tell the story. Everyone appeared to understand their characters perfectly and there were some good, strong, interpretations. They also moved with purpose and there were very few incidents of upstaging or 'blocking', which is another indication of good direction. Well done, Mark – this was definitely a directorial debut to be proud of!

MUSICAL DIRECTION (Nick Austin). Once again, Nick had worked his chorus, principles, and orchestra well. Voices were strong and well blended, harmonies clearly and confidently held, and the mix of voices to orchestra was well judged. Another very slick and professional presentation.

CHOREOGRAPHY (Debbie Mann). Once more, Debbie had managed to pull out all the stops and treated us to a wonderful and varied display of dancing. Debbie had some very talented dancers/movers amongst the cast and principals, which enabled her to set some more complex and challenging routines – especially the high-kicking sections involving *Buffalo Bill's Troupe* and *Dolly Tate*. 'There's No Business Like Show Business' was a whirl of action and colour, whilst the UV Indian Dance (which seemed to involve the whole cast!) was spectacular. Another success, Debbie – you are a very talented choreographer!

LIGHTING DESIGN & OPERATION (Geoff Bamford & Rebecca Wyard; Operator: Chris Withers). Again, another very slick and professional presentation from the lighting crew. I particularly liked the UV lighting during Indian dance, and the spotlights indicating the passage of time during the shooting competition was inspired. The general lighting was sympathetic and appropriate to each scene – all in all, an excellent contribution.

SOUND (Lewis Harman). The radio mics all functioned without a problem tonight, and their sound was well balanced and set with very natural-sounding equalisation. The sound FX were excellent. The train set the scene well, and was discretely faded so as not to distract attention from the action on the stage, and the motorcycle and crowd FX later on were credible and convincing. Again, an excellent and very effective contribution to the production.

SET DESIGN & STAGE MANAGEMENT (Alan Smith, Christine Stanford, Peter Tilbury & crew). Generally, I thought tonight's set suited its purpose well, and although minimalist at times, there was just enough to prompt our imagination to set the scene. The sepia tableau of curtains which remained around the stage was appropriate and helped to frame the action, and the panels which slotted together for the train and ferry were effective (although shifting them on and off between the last two scenes made a disturbing amount of noise backstage, overshadowing Dolly's gun-swap). And was that case supposed to remain on stage once the train had departed?

WARDROBE/COSTUMES (Gaby Anderson). When staging a production as specialised and spectacular as 'Annie...', it's important that the costumes don't let the side down. I'm glad to say that CMP had realised this, as once more, they had pulled out all the stops and gathered together a superb range and selection of outfits, whether it be the bright, flamboyant ball gowns during the Ballroom scene, or the scruffier Wild West attire sported by *Annie* and her fellow cowboys. *Buffalo Bill's Troupe* looked great in their matching hats, skirts, waistcoats and boots and the large cast of Indians looked authentically attired. Full marks once again, CMP!

MAKE UP & HAIR (Make Up: Linda Peacock, Elizabeth Britton & Ro Gorell). Generally, I thought that the make up team had done a good job, with everyone looking natural under the lights and in keeping with the period and setting, with *Annie* and the *Oakley Children* looking nice and dirty when appropriate. However, some of the ladies' hairpieces and wigs once again looked rather false – especially Annie's, which was very unflattering and made her look a bit like a water buffalo! It really is noticeable on a stage such as the Wilde Theatre and attention to detail is important in a show of this high standard. Investment in some more natural hairpieces and add-on extensions would really make a significant difference.

PROGRAMME (John Caley). I'm pleased to say I have been impressed with the way the standard of programmes at CMP has improved during my time as NODA Rep. and I am so glad that my comments are being listened to, as the programme is so important in communicating the right message to an audience. Tonight's A5 programme had an eye catching yellow card cover with a picture of the actress playing *Annie* in costume and inside had all the information the audience needed to know, without being too overwhelming – including a well-researched information piece on the legend of Annie Oakley. The cast photographs reproduced well and the resumés were interesting. There was a fair amount of advertising, but this was restricted mainly to the left hand pages, so didn't distract the eye too much (and it was good to see some adverts for other groups' productions!). And finally - many thanks again for the NODA advert – much appreciated! A very good effort, John – well done!

FRONT OF HOUSE (Maxine Robinson & friends of CMP). Once again, there was a good team working Front of House, selling raffle tickets by the dozen and showing people to their seats. Well done Maxine for coordinating this happy troupe!

To sum up, this was an excellent production of a classic family musical. Packed with recognisable toe-tapping numbers and laced with excellent choreography, good costumes and some excellent performances, CMP were onto a winner from curtain up! It was well cast, was strongly and competently directed and once more, everyone looked as though they were enjoying themselves on stage, which made the audience feel happy and a part of the action. Well done to everyone involved, especially Mark for his successful Directorial debut.

Good luck with 'Singing in the Rain' in May 2007!

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