

National Operatic & Dramatic Association

London Area



Society : Crowthorne Musical Players
 Production : South Pacific
 Date : Saturday 28th May 2005
 Venue : The Wilde Theatre, South Hill Park, Bracknell
 Report by : Kim Halliday, Regional Rep.
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Report

I would like to start by thanking Crowthorne Musical Players for inviting me to review this production. Although it has an rather flimsy storyline, *South Pacific* is a 'feel good' musical and is filled with recognisable and 'toe-tapping' tunes.

There were rather a lot of named parts in the programme cast list, including those who just had one-liners, so apologies if I concentrate on the main characters (or I'll be here all night!).

LAURA GOSDEN (Nellie Forbush). Laura was perfectly cast as 'leading lady', with good stage presence, and a good command of the entire auditorium. Her bouncy personality and enthusiasm suited the role well, and she moved, sang and acted with confidence and was able to bring just the right amount of sensitivity to the part when required. Although Laura had no trace of the (annoying!) high-pitched 'Little Rock' vocalisation which is usually used for *Nellie*, her more strident American accent worked well and was maintained throughout. Laura also paired well 'romantically' with Mark, which helped us to empathise with her predicament and their duets in particular were beautifully played.

MARK CONNOLLY (Emile de Beque). I thought that Mark, like Laura, was totally believable in his role as the seasoned Frenchman, and it was easy to see that we were witnessing an experienced character actor at work. As well as skillfully portraying *Emile* as the 'older gentleman' through body movement and mannerisms, Mark paired up well with Laura, treating us to some wonderful duets as well as solo numbers. He also worked well with the two children, making quite a believable 'Dad'. However, what made Mark stand out from most of the *Emile*'s I have seen over the years was that not only did he maintain a good French accent during his dialogue, he also SANG confidently with the accent and in a French style (rather reminiscent of Maurice Chevalier)! So many *Emile*'s use the show to exhibit their vocal chords, and end up dropping out of character by singing in their natural accents in order to reach the high notes! Well done, Mark, for playing *Emile* exactly as I'm sure the authors intended!

KAYLEIGH FORD (Liat). Although the part of *Liat* is a relatively minor role, I thought that Kayleigh carried it off very well indeed and used her body language well to convey unspoken emotions. She looked just about the right age and height-wise paired up well with David as *Cable*. A very convincing and pleasing portrayal, Kayleigh!

DAVID BENNETT (Lt. Joseph Cable). David is blessed with all the charisma and features of a good, strong leading man; he looks good and carries himself well on stage, projecting his lines competently, without appearing too arrogant. He also moves well, with good, confident coordination, and handles 'romantic' scenes sensitively, without embarrassment. I thought that David played *Cable* very well tonight and his pleasant 'musical theatre' singing voice gave the impression that *Younger than Springtime* almost certainly came from *Cable*'s heart.

DANUSIA MALECZEK (Bloody Mary). Danusia gave us a slightly different portrayal of the Tonkinese washer woman than is usually seen. At the start, I thought she was playing it a little too 'upmarket', especially with her beautiful outfit of silky tunic and culottes (I expected her to be rather grubby and a bit more 'rough around the edges'). However, I rather grew to like Danusia's quirky interpretation, and her spiky hairpiece, convincing accent and stooping body mannerisms helped her to bring out the comedy of the part well. She also maintained her characterisation throughout both of her solos, with *Bali Ha'i* standing out as one of the musical highlights of the show. You won me over, Danusia!

MALCOLM WELLARD (Luther Billis). Malcolm is no stranger to the stage and his portrayal of *Billis* as the 'joker in the pack' proved what a good comedy actor he is. He carried a good American accent throughout (although it wavered a little in moments of excitement) and had a good command of the stage and rapport with his fellow shipmates. And his interpretation of the hilarious *Honey Bun* will live with me for quite some time! Well done, Malcolm!

ROGER LANSDOWN, MORRISON THOMAS & CHRIS WOOD (Stewpot, Professor & Buzz Adams). I thought that, generally, **Roger, Morrison** and **Chris** handled their roles with confidence. They coped well with American accents and **Roger** and **Morrison** proved to be both singers and movers, delivering their solo lines in *There is Nothing Like a Dame* with clarity whilst hamming it up on stage. **Chris** was equally in fine form as *Buzz*. Three very good supporting performances.

PETER WINN & JOHN CALEY (Cmdr. Bill Harbison & Capt. George Brackett). Peter and John were appropriately cast, delivered their lines naturally and maintained good American accents. **John** in particular became convincingly 'agitated' when his character was in crisis, whilst **Peter** proved to be an excellent 'side-kick'.

JOHN BUTTERWORTH (Henry). This smaller, supporting role of the loyal manservant was portrayed convincingly by John. He had a good rapport with the children and delivered his lines confidently.

AMY & JOHN DILLON (Ngana & Jerome). Amy and John played the two children delightfully, and both had confidence and reacted well to the action on stage. As real-life brother and sister, there was obviously a good rapport between the two – especially when playing 'chase' – and *Dites Moi* was well delivered. I hope to see both progress into more adult roles in years to come!

CHORUS OF NURSES, ISLANDERS, ETC. Generally, I was very impressed by this chorus gathering. The dancers all looked good, had confidence and were able to carry out some complex choreography with apparent ease, whilst the rest of the company all looked happy with the moves they had been given. Some of the 'keep fit' girls had individual lines and these were projected well and there were some nice characterisations happening (I loved the lady who purposely couldn't quite keep up with the others during the keep fit!). The singing was also of a good standard, with the harmonies coming across clearly as required, and there were plenty of smiles. Well done to everyone for enhancing all the action and helping to bring the story alive!

DIRECTION (Lucy Gosling). In general, this production showed all the signs of being a well prepared, well directed, well organised, and (perhaps most importantly) well cast piece of musical theatre. The pace flowed well (although, for some reason, the last scene dragged a little), scene changes were slick, and the cast and crew seemed confident in what they were doing. All in all, a job very well done, Lucy!

MUSICAL DIRECTION (Nick Austin). Similar comments apply to the music – the cast were well rehearsed, timing was crisp, harmonies confidently delivered and voices blended into a pleasing whole. The orchestra were also well prepared – in fact, I think this is one of the largest orchestras I've seen in a show for some time. It is certainly the first time I've seen a tuba in the brass section! Well done, Nick, and also for blending the volume level nicely with the voices on the stage.

CHOREOGRAPHY (Natalie Oatham). 'South Pacific' is a relatively easy show to choreograph, with such well-known numbers, and set 'themes'; having said that, I thought that Natalie had done a very good job in using movement to enhance the music and the stage area was well utilised. It was obviously a huge bonus to have a cast who were in the main, experienced in 'moving', but there were some interesting formations and expressions happening which had obviously been well thought-out. If I had any criticism, it would be the excessive use of Shadow's style 'box steps', but apart from that, I think you deserve a huge pat on the back, Natalie!

LIGHTING (Alan Valentine & Charlotte Hollingshead). The lighting for tonight's show made good use of the cyc; the image of Bali Ha'i island upstage centre was lit to excellent dramatic effect. As always, it is only the unusual effects and the cock-ups that stand out in the memory, and I certainly didn't notice any cock-ups! One interesting but very welcome variation was to leave the house lights at half for the duration of the Overture (and also the Entr'Acte)... The Wilde Theatre is a very dark auditorium without the wash of light from the stage, and giving the audience some light during the opening of the show worked very well, for the safety of the late comers as well as from a comfort point of view.

SOUND (Lewis Harman). In general, voice reinforcement sound for tonight's performance was good; all the vocals were natural-sounding, and EQ levels were set well. There were one or two occasions when the difference in sound levels between the spoken dialogue (mics off) and opening lines of song (mics up to full) was rather stark. I would like to have seen the mics being faded in gently during the dialogue leading up to the opening of a song, to give our ears time to adjust. For the FX, the only minor disappointment was that the ringing phone in the office came from the wrong place. Apart from that, a slick performance from Sound, well integrated into the overall show.

SET DESIGN & STAGE MANAGEMENT (Alan Smith, Christine Stanford & crew). I was very impressed with the scenery used tonight, which must have been one of the best 'South Pacific' sets I have ever seen. The versatile 'pull in push out' way that it was able to convert from one scene to another almost seamlessly made all the difference and everything that was needed was there! The island silhouette in front of the cyc (which was hauntingly backlit during 'Bali Hai') was strikingly different from the more usual painted backdrops and the use of a parachute for a curtain during the 'performance' in Act 2 was so perfect – it's what they almost certainly would have used for real! The old-fashioned shower cubicle (complete with graffiti!), giant washing machine and period microphone also were in keeping with the era. Well done for hiring in such an innovative set and congratulations to those behind the scenes who ensured it was managed so smoothly!

WARDROBE/COSTUMES (Ro Gorell, Susanne Lee & Sue Dyer). 'South Pacific' requires quite a few 'specialist' costumes – notably the army and nurses uniforms, and wardrobes had really pulled out all the stops for this particular production as everyone looked in perfect character and costume. One good move was not to fall into the trap of kitting out the 'Seabees' in jeans, instead using the more likely chinos-type trousers. Modern jeans nearly always look out of place. The addition of dog tags was also a nice touch, and the decision to make the 'show-within-the-show' costumes look as if they really had been hand made by the cast was impressive and helped to add to the authenticity of the scene! The nurses, too, looked good in their uniforms and 'exercise gear'. I did wonder if *Bloody Mary* looked just a little bit too 'clean' in her appearance, and whether in real life, she and *Liat* would have been bare footed? Nevertheless, a fantastic effort from all in the wardrobe team – well done, ladies!

MAKE UP & HAIR (Make Up: Linda Peacock). 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. As with wardrobe above, I wondered whether *Bloody Mary* could have been just a little 'dirtier', befitting her status, but her overall appearance suited her costume. Hair was a slightly more disappointing. Although the gents looked in character and suited the Second World War setting, I thought that some of the ladies' hairpieces and wigs looked rather false. The only exceptions seemed to be *Nellie*'s short wig, which looked perfectly natural and *Bloody Mary*'s spiky top-knot, which looked quite quirky and suitably 'ethnic'. Perhaps a little bit more 'natural' styling could have been applied – especially to the chorus ladies – saving the need for any artificial enhancement? Just a minor quibble, but it does make a significant difference.

PROGRAMME (John Caley). Tonight's programme looked very neat, with clear, easy to read text and good quality black and white photographs of the cast. The cover image of a tropical beach and the American flag-themed lettering was striking and suited the story of 'South Pacific' and the faded/water-mark version on the middle pages worked well, embellishing the text. There were interesting cast resumès and information pieces on the show and well done for including a small piece on NODA! If I had any criticism, however, it would be the excessive amount of advertising which tended to encroach on the text. The general rule of thumb is to place any advertising on the left hand side of the brochure if possible, so that the eye is not so easily distracted from the factual information. Perhaps the inside cover could have been used for advertising also? And for some reason there was no synopsis given: remember, not everyone is familiar with the story! Nevertheless, this was a good overall brochure and I wish you luck in the NODA programme competition!

FRONT OF HOUSE. As usual, there was a good team working Front of House, and there appeared to be plenty of people available to sell programmes and raffle tickets, and to show people to their seats.

To sum up, I thought that tonight's production was well-cast, well-rehearsed and well-organised, with an impressive set and talented bunch of individuals both on-stage and off. Although the pace fell off a little towards the end, it was obvious the cast were enjoying themselves throughout the entire production and this enthusiasm conveyed itself well to the audience. Congratulations on another high standard production and I look forward to seeing you all again for 'Annie Get Your Gun' in May 2006.

Kim Halliday