

Rose Bowl Adjudication

Name of Society: Trowbridge Players and TAOS Musical Theatre
Name of Production: Oh What A Lovely War
Date: 22.10.2014
Venue: Arc Theatre, Trowbridge
Adjudicator: Mrs Clare Toghill

“At the going down of the sun and in the morning, we will remember them.” (For the Fallen, by Laurence Binyon, September 1914.)

With the World War One Centenary upon us these very few weeks, this production could not have been more perfectly timed. The auditorium was packed and one could sense the gratification, appreciation and contemplation throughout.

THE CAST: Pierrots and Pierrettes:

Sean Andrews, Christina Barnes, Sandie Brooks, David Bullock, Ed Byrne, Lesley Chapman, Kally Church, Helen Cosslett, Charlotte Davies, Daniel Fairgrieve, Tony Giddings, Karen Grant, Pete Grant, Stella Greaves, Chris Greenwood, Sarah Hanks, Denise Harrison, Becky Holden, Chloë Johnson, Lewis Kirkpatrick, Tim Knott, M’Lou Llewellyn, Chris Pollock, Charlie Reynolds, Alan Rutland, Paul West
Musicians

PRESENTATION/ SETTING – DESIGN AND DÉCOR:

(Set Construction) Tony Giddings, Barry Culverhouse, Nicky Runyard-Hunt, Pete Grant, Sylvia Seaman:

As instructed by Joan Littlewood herself in the stage directions of the original script, the acting space was uncluttered and plain and served as a forum in which the impressions and stories of the war could easily unfold. The band was situated SL and their space was attractively separated with colourful bunting. They certainly resembled an, ‘End of Pier Show’. The essential projector screen was large, professional and unobtrusive at the back of the acting space. It was used to great effect, and as recommended, it was fully within our field of vision. A promenade had been erected directly beneath the screen and this was fully utilised.

LIGHTING: Tony Giddings, Lewis Johnson

This is not a production which needs a huge amount of enhancement; however there are several key moments which are made impressive with some special effects and these opportunities certainly weren’t missed. This was a tricky production to light, because there are many other elements to consider, like the visibility of the projector screen and spotlights on actors at various moments. The lighting cover was very good throughout.

SOUND AND EFFECTS: Tony Giddings

There were many sound FX and they were all impeccably timed and well-cued. It is imperative that these FX are timely, as they add a whole other dimension to the action on stage and enable the audience to imagine certain wartime situations. The sound of gunshots punctuated the action at various points, which prompted the actors into intricate physical theatre and moments of intense drama and these worked so brilliantly because of the perfect timing of the FX. Other notable FX were; bells, train announcements, a travelling car, bombs overhead, (in particular, at the end of Act One when the volume was increased and the audience didn't know if it was OK to move; so enthralled in the action were they). This was an intense and powerful moment. The Grouse scene was superbly cued. This was a technically tricky scene and it worked fantastically well. The required work for this department was plentiful and they pulled it off most professionally and must be very proud of their contribution here.

**COSTUME: Stella Greaves, Joan Baggs, Sandra Tucker, Karen Grant
(Hired costumes: Bath Theatrical Costume Hire. Military accessories: Terry Bishop)**

This department must be congratulated on a superbly dressed show. It was exactly as Joan Littlewood stipulates in the foreword of the written script. The Pierrots and Pierrettes were immaculate and authentic. Their foot wear was co-ordinated and consistent, (gleaming white Jazz shoes/daps) and the tiny details had all been considered here. The Pierrettes' white skirts were mid-calf and were complete with two neat rows of black ric-rac. Their white tops, like their male counterparts, were the classic loose-fitting ones, complete with two exaggerated black pom-poms down the front for the girls, three for the boys and a ruffle around the neck for all. There were pinstriped blazers, hats to represent the various Nationalities in the War Game, great fur overcoats, a dancer in a pure, white Tutu, Soldier attire, long, silk gloves and feather boas, pristine nurses outfits, white, muslin eye bandages for the walking wounded, tin hats, long evening skirts and tiaras. The Irish lads were smart when dancing in their kilts before they proceeded to their deaths, the political lady addressing the crowds was suitably dressed head-to-toe in black, a priest looked the part, beautiful embroidered shawls were worn by the women. A good deal of work had gone into dressing this production, and the effect was most pleasing. Well done.

PROPS: Angela Giddings, Tony Giddings, Members and Friends of the Societies:

There were many necessary story-telling props here: hankies, an Usherette box, small, brown bean bags to represent grouse, a stuffed toy duck, an old-fashioned wheel chair and tartan blanket for the elderly American. The drinks on a silver tray were attractive and appealing, and the camera on a tripod looked very authentic and the flash was fantastic. The over-sized paper poppies were simply stunning as they were raised up to the actor's faces at the end of the performance.

PROJECTIONS: Simon Giddings. (Original slides: John Bury): These were superb and completely necessary to provide the edgy, factual details throughout the performance. The quality of the slides and textual details were top-notch and this element of the production was well-timed and professional throughout.

STAGE MANAGEMENT: Ollie Phipps, Deputy Stage Manager: Emma Elliott:

Well done to the team. They ensured that this was a slick production and there were many cues to get right!

MUSIC/ORCHESTRA/MUSICAL DIRECTION: Helen Heaton

Conductor / Piano: Helen Heaton

Reed I: Joanna Gurr

Reed II: David Shepard

Trumpet: Chris Sanders, David Hynds

Double Bass: Nigel Shires

Drums/Percussion: Tony Stockley

The sound levels for the band were perfect and this was immediately noticeable. The flute was particularly sweet during The War Game Instrumental. The band was lively and played well in unison. The music is so crucial in this production and it has to be able to change the tone in an instant; from jubilant to regretful, from triumphant to desperate and these subtle changes were beautifully played out here. The music was an absolute joy to listen to throughout. The trumpet solo in Act 2's Entr'acte was stunning. There were times when the music needed to underscore the dialogue and this was always perfect; if anything the dialogue could have been a little louder and snappier. The synthesised accordion sounds were spot-on in 'Fred K's Army'. The saxophone solo was thrilling and haunting as an argument occurred at a burial site. The final song was rousing and upbeat and completed the emotional journey we had been on.

This was a superb Orchestra. Their playing here was faultless and their work enhanced the action most brilliantly. Very well done.

DIRECTION: Sylvia Seaman, Assisted by: Angela Giddings:

This was a thoughtful, considered and intelligent production. The script was honoured and the original aim and vision adhered to.

To start, the audience filed into the auditorium via some hessian sand bags/barricades, directly past the end of pier band bedecked with colourful bunting and up to the raked seating. The house lights were up and the Pierretes and Pierrots were happily milling about on stage, breaking down any barriers with the audience.

The Overture was certainly rousing and there was some interaction between cast members and the audience. For 'Row, Row, Row', the stage lighting was superb; bright and happy as the Bank Holiday from Summer 1914 was hinted at with a sign on the projector and a wonderful upbeat energy from the cast. The blue cloth representing the sea was fabulous, as were the little crates on castors which transported Johnny Jones, followed by a couple from SR to SL. There was a fair amount going on here, yet it was not confusing or misleading in the slightest and the sheer exuberance the cast displayed here was enough to make the audience settle back in to their seats, in the knowledge that they were going to be in very safe hands for the evening.

The M.C. was very engaging and he led the production masterfully, without a hint of arrogance, or over-confidence. His joke-telling was done with a warm delivery and the strength of his dialogue was never lost.

The War Game was effective. The German spoke with a very gruff voice and his accent was excellent. The two from Russia were very dour. Britain was upright and tilting on the balls of his feet, with his arms braced behind his lower back.

All the Promenade scenes beneath the screen were well-acted, with expression aplenty.

The Bar Lady was deep-voiced and nervous, suspicious and agitated and this was good.

The Ballerina on stage during voice-overs was another pleasing moment.

The Pierrots and Pierretes clapping in unison in mime, was another striking moment of physical theatre and ensemble playing.

The women singing in a semi-circle for, 'Your King and Country' were poised.

The soldiers re-enacting the ride on horseback over the line and falling whilst a blood-red hue was projected onto the screen was a powerful moment.

The Girl in the red, military style jacket was mesmerising as she sassily sauntered around the acting space. The song, 'When Belgium Put the Kibosh on the Kaiser' stretched this singer, but she attempted it with gusto and gave us very pleasing entertainment.

The French and German Officers' monologues were particularly striking and were beautifully enhanced by the spotlight.

The Drill Sergeant was suitably gruff and comfortable with ad-libbing, a hurried pace and blurred expletives. He added the necessary humour and parody. The Umbrella One provided the perfect contrast here.

'Make a Man of You' was performed with a lovely, fresh honesty, which is required here; so well done on realising this subtlety.

The split-screen scenes were effective.

The young lad interpreter was very convincing. Well done.

The walking wounded section on stage was touching and they successfully embodied the attitude of this section of the play.

'Hitchy-Koo' was a sweet duet dance and solo song, by the Usherette.

The Trench scene was fantastic. The groupings of the actors, the use of space and tableaux was very pleasing here. This scene maintained a steady pace and the drama and tension here was tangible. The soldier seated on the stool performed with a very touching truth and sincerity. As the German soldiers gingerly entered the acting space, the death toll figures relentlessly flashed across the screen, and the men turned to silently acknowledge this. This was powerful and non-sentimental theatre and this is exactly what Joan Littlewood was after. This moment was so all-encompassing, that when the end of Act 1 passed and the Interval commenced, the audience was uncertain and didn't move; so caught up were they in the action before them, and no doubt their minds were still processing the futile loss of life in this and indeed, any war.

Act 2.

The Death Toll passed along the projector, whilst the cast assembled and sang, 'Oh It's A Lovely War'. Again, the energy and verve here was outstanding.

The Grouse-Shot was brilliant and the physical theatre involved here, along with the split second timing of the 'grouse' being thrown onto stage was impeccable and again, highlighted what a well-rehearsed and slick production this was. The dialogue that took place between the Nationalities here was superbly regulated and timed; there was

a very pleasing rhythm in place. The American was great, in particular here; loud, slow, deliberate and opinionated.

'Gassed Last Night' was a moving song, when the images of warfare were before us on the screen.

The male singer of, 'Roses of Picardy' sang beautifully and effortlessly on the steps SR and the music underscoring the following dialogue was fabulous again. The dialogue during the dance could have been tighter, but this is a minor point.

It was captivating when the two Irish soldiers were shot offstage. The Sergeant played this down onstage; it was difficult and a very sincere portrayal. 'I Don't Want to Be A Soldier' and 'Hanging on the Old Barbed Wire' were superb in their own right, as were 'I Wore A Tunic' and 'Joe Soap's Army'. As the play developed and became darker and the futility became more apparent; so the performers were able to intensify the mood on stage and tell the story. It is a very fine balance to achieve, and it was most certainly achieved in Trowbridge that night. The Priest with his Welsh accent and humble delivery looked out to the audience, almost as if to catch a glimmer of hope.

'I Want To Go Home' was powerful. The Nurse was gentle and genuine.

The audience interaction/participation in 'Sister Susie', was fun, but perhaps a missed opportunity? You could have employed even more Panto-like effervescence and it felt a little restrained here. Again, 'Lambs To The Slaughter' might have been even more bitter and vitriolic.

The striking, oversized red poppies, which the cast held up to their faces, were an incredible addition and proved to be a most poignant and memorable image of this production.

PRODUCTION:

This was a superb production. It maintained a pleasing rhythm throughout; it was highly polished, yet free from constraint in its delivery of movement, ad-libbing and comment. All of the research had been undertaken and it was factually correct and sensitively presented. The high energy created by the cast didn't falter for a second. It is an exhausting show to pull-off successfully, and sometimes it isn't, but here the local audiences of Trowbridge and its surrounding areas were treated to a real slice of high-end theatre. This was an intelligent interpretation of the script; the ensemble - playing here was key as the cast worked creatively together to create scenes and vignettes with a seamless fluidity, which flowed effortlessly to create the whole. The juxtaposition of scenes of wartime tragedy and the Music Hall jollity sat very well. You did Joan Littlewood and the Theatre Workshop justice here. You must be very proud of all that you have achieved.

Thank you for your most kind hospitality and I wish you every success with your next production,

CLARE TOGHILL