

COTSWOLD SAVOYARDS

Follies **The Playhouse, Cheltenham** **November 25th 2015**

Director: Caroline Young

MD: Allan Gillespie

Choreographer: Nikki Ponting

Fanography: Miss Kitty Robbins

This is an excellent show for involving all society members, as there are exciting roles for 'ladies of a certain age', alongside younger performers. It is set in The Weismann Theatre, at a reunion of the former Follies stars who appeared there in their youth. The basic story tells of the relationships of two married couples set against the backdrop of the once glamorous, but soon to be demolished theatre where they all met. The way it is told can be quite complex for an audience to follow if they do not know the show. The last time I reported on the show I was told that I had not understood it, which was highly likely as it was the first time I had seen it, along with most of the audience I suspect. I am still unsure if I understood it totally the second time around, but this production made much more sense and I did enjoy it.

As you arrived, you were greeted by showgirls and a photographer, all welcoming you to the party, which created a happy, relaxed atmosphere and made you feel part of the production; the photographer turned out to be an important part of the show. During the show the Theatre was used in an interesting way, including using the balcony for 'Waiting for the Girls Upstairs', and for many of the entrances and exits, all of which continued to engage the audience.

The set was simple with a construction of white boxes giving varying height and a set of steps stage left; with tables and chairs stage right, which were moved as required. There were dirty looking, torn, moth-eaten drapes which gave the impression of long neglect. But I did feel that some sort of transformation was needed for 'Loveland' and the following numbers, perhaps the addition of a glitter curtain. Props were minimal, as all the food and drinks at the party were extremely well mimed. The band was set at the back of the stage and also seemed part of the party. The photographs which were being 'taken' throughout the party, were projected at the back of the stage, it was a clever idea.

The lighting had been designed to create the atmosphere of the crumbling theatre, but I felt there were issues with the lighting and it did not do the show justice. There were several late cues and some of the actors could not 'find' the lights, also the follow spots were not always well operated.

Costumes had been well designed with excellent contrast for the 'present day' people, and their younger counter parts. The party guests were in very glitzy, slinky, colourful dresses, with the 'younger selves' in ghostly contrast of simple whites and greys. It worked very well and helped clarify what was happening.

National Operatic and Dramatic Association

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Nikki Ponting had devised interesting choreography for the show, the big tap number, which includes both generations of 'Follies' girls, needs to be spectacular enough for 'The Follies' but simple enough for everyone to dance competently and this she achieved. Miss Kitty Ribbons had certainly made sure the girls the girls fluttered their fans well.

The music of Sondheim is well known for its complexity and this show is no exception. Musical Director Allan Gillespie was in control at all times of both musicians and singers. The band did not overpower the singers but occasionally some of the singers needed a little more volume. Roscoe's opening number 'Beautiful Girls' gave a foretaste of what was to come, it was well sung with good supporting work from the chorus. There is insufficient space to comment on all the musical numbers but highlights included 'Could I Leave You?' and 'Losing My Mind'. The ensemble number 'Waiting for the Girls Upstairs' was particularly impressive with the participants spread around the theatre. Both generations performed their songs well and I particularly liked Carlotta Campion's presentation of 'I'm Still Here'.

The choice of show was obviously popular and had attracted a large, competent cast. There were good portrayals from the 'older girls' reliving past triumphs. The four main characters of Sally, Phyllis, Buddy and Ben provided a challenge as they have their younger counterparts and so there have to be similar elements in the personalities of younger and older selves. They worked well together creating some poignant moments of 'remembered youth'. The physical similarities between all 'younger and older selves' were amazing and you could easily identify the characters. The whole cast had developed individual characters, some achieving more depth than others, but all working well together. But for me the older Phyllis Stone had encapsulated the character perfectly both emotionally and physically.

Director Caroline Young, had worked hard with her cast who had obviously enjoyed working with her; she brought some interesting ideas to the production with the very simple set, projected photographs which helped tell the story, and her use of the theatre. Both cast and audience had obviously enjoyed the evening.

Congratulations to everyone on an excellent evenings entertainment.

*Frankie Telford.
Regional Representative. District 15.*

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