



Society : Cygnet Players
Production : Merrily We Roll Along
Date : September 8th, 2018
Venue : Putney Arts Theatre
Report by : Des Wilby – Regional Representative (District 3)

Show Report

It was a pleasure to have visited Cygnet Players again and, as has become the norm, to enjoy yet another wonderful evening's entertainment. Many thanks to Adam Walker-Galbraith for his kind invitation and to the 'front of house' team for their warm welcome on arrival.

'Merrily We Roll Along' is a challenging musical and I was intrigued to find out how Cygnet Players would tackle such a show. This Sondheim and Furth venture was launched on Broadway in 1981 but for various reasons only ran for 16 performances. Sadly, since then, it has rarely been performed by either professional or amateur groups. As such, neither my guest nor I had seen this show previously and it was most certainly a refreshing change to see new material. We both came away feeling hugely impressed with the entire cast, this performance and 'Merrily We Roll Along' in general.

It is easy, with hindsight, to see why Broadway quickly lost interest in this show. The musical has a complicated narrative told backwards - beginning in 1976 and ending back in 1957. The story centres around three young talents, their rise to fame and the price they each pay for success. However, in order to fully appreciate it I did leave the theatre feeling I wanted to see the show again. To me, it also lacked that essential ingredient of a successful musical - at least one great stand-alone number. Not something of course for which even the greats can legislate. Maybe the reverse narrative proved too much for the early audiences but to me it was enthralling to go back in time. I certainly enjoyed the finale which ended on a 'high note' with the three new friends looking forward. This as opposed to looking back on a ruined friendship, an alcoholic lifestyle and yet another divorce/remarriage!

Overall, I felt this was another fabulous production from a society that continuously strives for excellence. I do suspect however that the relatively small cast, coupled with a comparatively unknown show itself, might have been the reason for some empty seats in the auditorium. Definitely not what I've come to expect. Cygnet Players must be applauded here for taking a 'longer-term view', in staging fresh material, and for not being solely focused on immediate box office returns.

Zoe Dobell brought her directing experience to this production and is to be congratulated for a hugely successful show. Assisted by Aimee Parnell and Callum Walker-Galbraith, this was a classy performance delivered to a high standard by a quality cast. The attention to detail throughout ensured everything ran like clockwork. Indeed, what appeared both slick and effortless merely confirmed the extensive rehearsals and overall commitment from those involved.

Congratulations to Mark Stanford, and his orchestra, for a fine performance which greatly helped to make this a top notch show. All music was in harmony with the action and never overpowering in any sense. Timing was perfect, and it was obvious that all vocals had all been well-rehearsed. Overall, this was quite an achievement considering the challenging music and positioning of the orchestra out of direct cast sight.

The stage setting for this production was simple, but highly effective, and focused mainly on a large projection slide show. This included some wonderful photos, taken throughout the years, and focused on the main characters. This really helped the audience to keep track of time in reverse and left the stage uncluttered. As such, focus remained on the cast who had ample room to move and the storyline.

The three leads were quite simply exemplary, and carried the show with great confidence. Andrew Overin, as Franklin Shepard, is both a great singer and a consummate actor. Andrew was more than ably matched by Adam Walker-Galbraith as Charley Kringas and Olga-Marie Pratt as Mary Flynn. Most of the songs are narrative and required considerable acting skills as well as emotional delivery to get them across. It was soon apparent that in the hands of these three it was never going to be a problem. Together they owned the stage and held the audience's attention perfectly.

Louisa Roberts was fabulous as Frank's second wife Gussie Carnegie – the scheming climber who simply dominated Frank at will. Some wonderful acting was augmented by a lovely singing voice. Kate Gledhill was ideally cast as Frank's first wife Beth. Whilst Gussie was brash and overstated, Beth was the opposite and delivered a more innocent and understated performance here. Both captured the mood of their respective characters and periods of Frank's life. Russell Bramley as impresario, Joe Josephson, puffed suitably away on his Havana cigar (unlit in this modern anti-smoking era), carrying the part with much aplomb. Some strong characterisation and vocal skills.

Mary Clare, Kathryn Felton, Phoebe Fleetham, Sarah Johnson, Brett McHargue, Maggie Murray, Rosalind Orchard, Sarah Prescott, Will Prescott, Fongphu Tran and Kate Vlietstra all provided slick support and an excellent ensemble. The script calls for numerous cameo performances and these greatly added to the overall success of this show. Finally, a special note of congratulations to young Ethan Manwaring who filled the role of Frank Junior very well indeed.

Sarah Wood brought her experience to this production as Stage Manager. Together with her stage crew Sarah ensured everyone, and everything, was in the right places at the right time. Scene changes were seamless and there were no awkward delays or missed entrances/exits.

Both the stage Lighting and Projection were in the capable hands of Richard Pike. Whilst the stage lighting was relatively straightforward, and more than adequate for this production, it was the projection that needed to be carefully managed. As a slide show it was perfectly in time with the action and this really helped the audience's understanding.

Sound was jointly managed by Jo and Stuart Epps and was ideal for the production with all words and lyrics being clearly audible. Kathryn Felton managed Props and Furniture – both of which were of a good quality and suitable for the time period being portrayed.

The programme was of a very good standard and full of much information for the audience to enjoy reading. There were some great photographs of rehearsals together with cast and creative team biographies. The Chairman's Introduction and Director's Note were both interesting to read. As always, it was pleasing to see the prominent NODA reference.

Following 'Top Hat' and 'A Murder is Announced', this show proved to be yet another excellent production. I am quite certain that the entire audience, like me, left feeling hugely impressed with the quality of this cast and Cygnet Players in general.

I look forward to visiting again in 2019 and enjoying a busy schedule of shows!

Des Wilby
Regional Representative
NODA London District 3