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Society : Shinfield Players Theatre
Production : Betty Blue Eyes
Date : 12/10/2023
Venue : Shinfield Players Theatre
Reviewer : Cate Naylor

Show Report

Thank you for inviting me to your production of Betty Blue Eyes. What a relief for you all to be finally bringing it to the stage after the Covid pandemic and Storm Eunice delays and then a cancellation due to sickness in the cast last week.

Set in 1947 in the northern town of Shepardsford, Yorkshire, belts are being tightened and the townsfolk are having to cope with rationing, while others feather their nests. This musical based on the film, A Private Function and revolves around the black-market meat trade, featuring the antics of a few of the town's men and a pig being illicitly reared for a council banquet.

Cast

Mark Read (Gilbert Chilvers) Long-suffering husband Gilbert Chilvers, was portrayed by Mark Read who was utterly believable in the role, giving a very empathetic performance. I loved his characterisation of Gilbert - the indecisiveness and gentle way he was with his wife and mother-in-law coupled with his embarrassment over his heartthrob status and 'magic fingers' was perfect. Mark sang with excellent tuning and lovely phrasing, and despite struggling with his voice due to a nasty throat infection and clearly still feeling pretty poorly, he gave a great performance. His solo numbers "A Place on the Parade" and "The Kind of Man I Am" were beautifully sung and acted.

Lara Savory (Joyce Chilvers) was fabulous as Gilbert's strident and dominant wife Joyce, and she gave a very powerful performance as the aspiring wife determined make her husband successful and to be somebody of note in the town. Lara brought Joyce to life by showcasing fantastic comedic timing, expressive facial features and character acting in this comical leading role. Added to this, she also had

strong vocals, singing with expression and emotion in her many songs including her showstopper “Nobody”. Lara really carried the show, what a great performance!

Linda Bostock (Mother Dear) took on the role of Mother Dear - seventy-four and always hungry. She totally immersed herself into the part in a charming, comedic representation. Her every move, line and facial reaction was in keeping with the role and her delight with eating all that spam was very funny. Linda had great chemistry with both Lara and Mark and gave a truly funny performance in the song ‘Pig, No Pig’ with them.

The Men

I enjoyed the grouping of **Matthew Chishick** as Henry Allardyce, **Dan Walford** as Dr Swaby and **Neil Coupland** as Francis Lockwood. These three worked well together, each creating a different character which was totally suited to their place in the story as they schemed to illegally to serve Betty at the banquet for Princess Elizabeth’s wedding. **Matthew** as Allardyce was just a big softie who wanted to save Betty, and as it turned out, fell in love with her big blue eyes! Together with Gilbert he sang 'Betty Blue Eyes' with such love for the pig. **Dan** was perfect as Dr Swaby, he was suitably dominant and arrogant thinking only of his own gain. He sang with lovely tuning and performed well. **Neil** as Lockwood was fairly serious as fitted the part, but turning his head a little towards the audience when delivering his lines would have improved his clarity and performance.

Matthew Daniell (Mr Wormold) this is a difficult part to play as Wormold the meat inspector really is the villain of the piece. Matthew without raising this voice and with some mean facial expressions managed to communicate this to a certain extent, but developing the dark and sinister side of his character would have made his performance much more menacing. He really looked the part dressed in a long black leather coat and moved well around the stage well. Although, he was a little hesitant with his singing on occasions, he certainly captured the dark humour in his main number “Upholding the Law”.

Supporting roles were played by **Derek Lockwood** (Farmer Sutcliffe and Police Sergeant Noble) who deserves a special mention for stepping into the role with only a week to learn both parts and for giving a strong performance in both roles. **Jeff Gilbert** (Mr Metcalf, butcher), **Gordon Bird** (Mr

Barraclough, butcher, BBC Newsreader and Arthur Cunliffe), **Simon Trinder** (Mr Nuttall, butcher), and **Joe Richardson** (Reg Bowen, policeman and waiter). I particularly enjoyed Gordon's portrayal of a post war newsreader and his accent and delivery were spot on and the three butchers gave subtle hints of their dealings with the black market which added an amusing flavour. All the men worked to deliver their individual characters and perform in the group numbers, but at times seemed a little unsure and lacking in confidence in the singing.

The Women

Maggie Smith played snooty Mrs Allardyce who thought she was better than the other wives with confidence and good stage presence. Veronica Allardyce was played by **Daisy Collins** who gave a good performance as the stropky teenager daughter of the Allardyce's with lots of sighing and flouncing off.

The show has some great 'cameo' parts for women. **Emma Fuller** (Mrs Metcalf) was nicely suggestive when flirting with Gilbert and sang the reprise of 'Magic Fingers' with feeling and a glint in her eye. She was joined by **Elisabeth Richardson** (Mrs Lockwood), **Charis Luke** Mrs Lester, **Janine McCoull** (Mrs Roach), **Helen Cuthbertson** (Mrs Turnbull), **Joanne Marchant** (Mrs Cunliffe) and **Robin Slone** (Mrs Tillbrook) and together they gave strong support in the musical numbers and dance routines. They were a stropky bunch, definitely not willing to lie down and take rationing when it was clear that not everyone was playing fair.

The singing trio of **Janine McCoull, Charis Luke and Helen Cuthbertson** were excellent, singing with beautiful tuning, lovely phrasing, and brilliant harmonies at the dance. In 'Magic Fingers' they gave a delightful and heartfelt performance with a lovely touch of comedy as they had their feet done by 'lovely' Gilbert.

Charis Luke (Princess Elizabeth) spoke with perfect received pronunciation as Princess Elizabeth and she moved with grace and poise, really capturing Princess Elizabeth's gestures and mannerisms.

Dancers

Joseph Boardman, Jemima Davey-Smith, David Richardson and Trisha Sharma Together, these four gave some interest to the dances. They had clearly learned the dance moves, but relaxing a little and smiling would improve the smoothness of the dances.

Creatives

Carol Vockins (Director) Despite many delays and difficulties, Carol and her production team managed to put on this musical and it was clear that the cast were all really enjoying themselves. There were some very strong performances from the principals who had developed their characters well. The story is told throughout by an array of minor principal characters and the cast in the main part showed their individual characters to communicate the story. I understand that this is to be Carol's last big production after many years in the director's chair. I have no doubt that Shinfield Players are very grateful to her for all her hard work over the years and I am sure we will still see her at the theatre for many years to come.

Lara Savory (Musical Director) **Mark Webb** (Keyboards and Rehearsal Pianist)

Stepping into the role of Musical Director whilst playing the leading lady is a huge challenge but was one to which Lara rose brilliantly. She had clearly worked hard with the principals to give great vocal performances and also with the trio of girls who sang with brilliant close harmony! There was some strong choral singing from the women's ensemble with some good harmony singing and I have no doubt that working with Lara had given them all confidence to sing.

I am sure that both Lara and the cast were delighted to have such an experienced keyboard player as Mark to accompany them. As always, he played brilliantly both in the many musical numbers but also in the underscore for the scene changes.

Graham Vockins (Stage Manager) assisted by **Steve Toon, Steve King, Kriss Vockins, Sam Turner, Tim Howling, Donna Hutt and Yvonne Mitchell** (Stage Crew) There were a huge number of scene changes swapping from the street scene to the house interior which kept the back-stage crew very busy. I don't know if there were some issues with the trucks and set pieces on the night that I saw the show,

but many of the set changes seemed to be slow and rather clunky and the trucks looked to be fighting back a bit. There also seemed to be a little confusion at times as to where the many set pieces were to be placed. Some of the scene changes were done whilst the more intimate and quiet scenes were happening at the front of the stage and pulling the tabs across for these would have reduced distractions for the actors and audience. Despite the complicated scene changes, the stage manager kept the wings clear so that the actors could enter and leave the stage unimpeded.

Graham Vockins (Set Design) with **Di Capel, Natalie Clarke, Tim Howling, Yvonne Mitchell, Graham Smith, Steve Toon, Steve King, Kriss Vockins and Debbie Wheeler** (Set Build and Decoration)

The set was designed with reversible trucks and hinged flaps which gave on one side a Yorkshire Street with an array of shop fronts stage left and right street and on the other, the Chilver's home. The shop fronts were brilliantly designed and brightly painted with some lovely authentic features added, but the trucks were very large and looked to be rather difficult to move. The prices for meat in the butcher's windows in old money was a nice touch and the fencing for the pig farm gave a clear indication of the different location where Betty was being hidden. The austere decoration of the Chilver's house was very much of the time and signified their low status.

Technical Support

Matthew Chishick, Graeme Rhodes, Phil Gowen (Lighting and Sound Design) **Graeme Rhodes** (Technical Operator) **Pete Ashton** (projection) and **Matthew Chishick** (Filmed Sequences)

Lighting was effective and in keeping with the settings and locations. The sound was well balanced between the cast and the keyboard and there was only one episode of feedback which was quickly sorted. I was pleased to see that the cast all had mics particularly as this meant that no-one had to strain their voices to get the volume. Back projection was used to enhance the locations and added interest to the set. On occasions this was a little lost in the brighter lighting, but in the most part worked well. The film sequence of Gilbert cycling off with Betty in his bike basket added a little humour to the beginning of act 2.

Carol Vockins (Wardrobe Mistress) assisted by **Debbie Wheeler and Graham Smith**

The costumes were all authentic and in keeping with the period. There was a lot of attention to detail with period dresses, head scarves and coats for the women and array of suits for the men. Mr Wormold looked very menacing in his long black leather coat and the singing trio were very reminiscent of the Andrew's Sisters. Princess Elizabeth's wedding dress was beautiful and very authentic for the period. Joyce's change from her dowdy daywear to a sparkly evening dress was very neatly managed behind cabaret dancers in very impressive costumes with large feather fans.

Pam Dennis (Make Up and Wigs) the make-up and hair looked particularly good and of the period. Mr Wormold's makeup was very effective and added to his menacing look.

Debbie Wheeler (Properties) assisted by **Graham Smith and Carol Vockins**

There were a huge number of props and set dressings ranging from large numbers of cuts of meat and shopping baskets to a bicycle and banquet tables complete with white table clothes and Union Jacks. The ration books were a nice authentic touch and the placards held by the women when they were protesting were very effective.

Katrina Shakespeare had created a near life sized Betty Blue Eyes with beautiful big blue eyes who travelled around in a wonderful wooden wheelbarrow. Very often, pig puppets are used for Betty Blue Eyes, and this was an original and endearing version of the character which had been carefully designed and made.

Rachel Lockwood (Chaperone Co-ordinator) With under-sixteens in the cast, Rachel ensured that they were safe at all times so that they could enjoy their involvement in this show.

The programme designed by **Carol Vockins** included character photographs and bios with quotes and character descriptions which were interesting. It was a novel idea to print some recipes from Joyce's war time cookbook and made me glad that we don't have rationing now so that I can avoid the mutton and scraps!! It would have been nice though to have had a list of the songs and the singers

included for interest. The programme though was clear to read and complete with a bright picture of Betty which was very eye-catching.

Well done to Carol, the cast and production team for surviving all the difficult events and glitches that were thrown at you during the making of this production and for all your hard work in bringing it to the stage. It was very clear from seeing everyone working so well together on stage and from speaking to some of the cast afterwards that you thoroughly enjoyed working on this show and performing together.

Cate

NODA London District 13 Representative