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Society : Shinfield Players Theatre
Production : Grease
Date : 07/07/23 Cast One, 09/07/23 Cast Two
Venue : Shinfield Players Theatre, Reading
Reviewer : Cate Naylor

Show Report

Thank you for inviting me to review both casts in your production of Grease. It was clear that the youth group members were enjoying themselves and the energy and enthusiasm shown by every single one of them was tangible in their performances. All the main principals gave convincing portrayals of their respective characters, and they worked well together supported by the ensemble.

Cast

Daniel Pyke (Danny) This was a demanding role, and Daniel gave a good performance as Danny Zuko playing against two different Sandys. He nailed trying to play it cool in front of his gang and using his easy-going charm to win the ladies. However, developing the harder side of his character would have established his authority as the leader of the Burger Palace Boys more convincingly. I loved his facial expressions when he was playing it 'cool' and his reaction to the Sandy reveal as she came in before '*You're the One That I Want*' was excellent. Daniel sang well and his falsetto was particularly impressive.

Jodie Wheeler (Cast 1) perfectly portrayed Sandy's 'good girl' character delivering just enough shyness and quiet innocence for the role. Her transformation at the end from shy Sandy into extrovert sexy Sandy brought a gasp from the audience and she exuded confidence in '*You're the one that I want*'. Jodie sounded a little less assured in '*Hopelessly Devoted to You*' but she had a sweetness to her voice which suited the song.

Dani Corp (Cast 2) played the part with assurance, contrasting Sandy's change from innocent and wholesome to sassy and confident very effectively. She had good stage presence and interacted well with the other cast members. Dani is an accomplished vocalist, and her rendition of '*Hopelessly Devoted to You*' was very emotional. She too gave her all in '*You're the one that I want*'.

The Pink Ladies in their 'club jackets' worked well together as the group of teen girls who hung around the cool guys and rebelled against following the rules.

Rizzo

Both **Lucy Fudge** (Cast 1) and **Eloise Seery** (Cast 2) drew the comedy, insecurity and prickliness from the role of Rizzo, capturing her tough sarcastic character and contrasting it with her vulnerability. **Lucy** communicated a lot in her facial expressions and reactions which were very much on show in both '*Look at me, I'm Sandra Dee*' and '*There Are Worse Things I Could Do*'. The natural texture to her voice was well suited to both songs.

Eloise had good rapport with the other Pink Ladies and sang with good tuning and lots of emotion. She has grown in confidence since last year, but relaxing and smiling will develop her performance even more.

Frenchy

Jemima Davy-Smith (Cast 1) and **Natalia Hobbs** (Cast 2) shone as Frenchy, the good-natured dreamer, giving a quirky and ditsy characterisation which was perfect for part. They were both confident in the role and commanded the stage. **Jemima** was a very accomplished dancer and impressed with her cartwheels. **Natalia** sang confidently and held her harmony brilliantly in '*Freddie My Love*'.

Marty

Holly Adamson (cast 1) played the part well and with great characterisation, really communicating Marty's attempts to act sophisticated and older than she was. Holly had great facial expressions and perfect comic timing. She sang '*Freddie my Love*' with lovely tone and tuning maintaining her character throughout.

Benita Venables (cast 2) also captured the character of Marty well and really showed the materialistic side of her in her characterisation. Sadly, she started the song '*Freddie my Love*' on the wrong note which affected her singing for the rest of the song, but despite this, she maintained her character and really acted the song.

Jan

Daisy Collins (cast 1), **Rebecca MacKenzie** (cast 2) portrayed the funny and slightly awkward personality of Jan brilliantly and perfectly captured the humour in her compulsive eating. Both sang with expression in the duet '*Mooning*', holding their own against the more dominant Roger and sang some lovely harmonies in '*Freddie my Love*'.

The Burger Palace Boys

As the 'super-cool' gang trying to look hard, the boys worked very well together with many superb highlights from individuals. They demonstrated great camaraderie, gaining energy from each other.

Drew Cleghorn (Kenickie) was perfectly cast with just the right amount of bold, brash cheekiness for the tough and surly rogue Kenickie. He contrasted his machismo and dangerous personality with an obvious love for and excitement about his car as well as at the end a fondness for Rizzo. His delivery of '*Greased Lightening*' was brilliant, full of energy and very well sung.

Jack Rowland (Doody) had excellent characterisation with his boyish smile and easy-going nature. He had some lovely facial expressions and got every ounce of humour out of the role as he tried to be as cool as the others. Jack had a very natural singing voice with great tone and dynamics and gave a stand-out performance in '*Those Magic Changes*'.

Joseph Boardman (Roger) captured the character of the joker of the group. He was good natured and although the 'butt' of many jokes was also able to laugh at himself. He sang '*Mooning*' with confidence, but developing some light and shade in his dynamics would have improved his performance.

Charles Jackson (Sonny) gave a really good performance as the guy who thinks he is irresistible to women but isn't quite as cool as he wants to be. He was confident both in his acting and his singing and always stayed in character. I have seen Charles in a lot of shows over the years and for me, this was his best performance.

Shaan Oza (Miller and Vince Fontaine) gave a confident performance as Vince Fontaine, the self-centred, slimy radio disk jockey trying to relive his teenage years.

Trisha Sharma (Patty) had great energy as the overly enthusiastic head cheerleader competing for Danny's attention. She was confident and performed with lots of sincerity, but slowing down her line delivery a little would have made her performance even better.

Jessica Widdicombe (Cast 1) and **Hannah Hillier** (Cast 2) both gave good performances as Eugene the class valedictorian, portraying his nerdy physically awkwardness and gullibility very well. Hannah in particular had great comic timing and facial expressions, but both girls brought a lot of humour to the role.

SJ Creighton (Jo Casino and Teen Angel) As Jo, SJ brought a lot of charisma to the role as she compered the high school dance and she led *'Born to Hand Jive'* with expression and style. Her performance as Frenchy's guardian Teen Angel, who encouraged her to stay in school was brilliant. She had a very natural rich voice with excellent tone and tuning hitting some very high notes superbly well in *'Beauty School Drop Out'*.

Daisy Cooke (Miss Lynch) portrayed the no-nonsense, serious, English teacher with confidence. She had very clear diction and great stage presence. It is not so easy to play a character who is a lot older than yourself, but Daisy did a great job. I was definitely quaking in my boots when she blew her whistle and shouted at Sonny.

Abi Jackson (Cha Cha, The Film Stars; Sheila, Hero and Scientist, Cheerleader and Ensemble) Abi was certainly kept busy with very many different roles and singing and dancing in most of the group routines. Her characterisation as Cha Cha, the arrogant loud mouthed 'best dancer' from St. Bernadette's was spot on and she brilliantly led poor Eugene round the dance floor in the Cha-Cha-Cha. Her multi-roles in the drive-in movie were well played with perfect facial expressions.

Abi Jackson, Benita Venables, Daisy Collins, Daisy Cooke, Dani Corp, Eloise Seery, Holly Adamson, Jemima Davy-Smith, Jessica Widdicombe, Jodie Wheeler, Lucy Fudge, Natalia Hobbs and Rebecca McKenzie. Between them, this group played the Cheerleaders, Casino Chips, Greasers and other ensemble parts. They gave great support to the principles both in their singing, adding some harmonies to the songs and in their dancing. They had good energy and performed the dance numbers with skill and enthusiasm. Just one thing to remember, smile 😊!

Creatives

Gordon Bird (Director) assisted by **Mark Read**

It must have been quite a challenge with such a large cast and some split roles to bring this musical to the stage, but Gordon and Mark had ensured that the cast were well rehearsed, understood their characters and developed believable relationships. In the most part, the dialogue was clear, and the cast maintained their American accents with good diction and volume throughout. The stage was used effectively and there were no issues with blocking, but on a few occasions, the transitions were a little slow. A couple of the solos were sung centre stage in blackout with a spot leading to rather static performances. Adding low light and a little movement, particularly in '*There are worse things I can do*' would have improved the communication between Rizzo and Sandy. As always, Gordon and his team worked together to give the young people the opportunity to learn stagecraft, gain in confidence and to enjoy performing in front of enthusiastic audiences.

Rachel Lockwood (Musical Director) had clearly worked hard with this large cast to teach them the iconic songs from Grease, and it was good to see how far the young people have come in their singing this year. Many of the leads were very experienced, but it was lovely to see some of the cast singing a solo for the first time. There were some lovely harmonies which added to the quality of the performance, but working some more on light and shade in the dynamics in some of the songs would improve this even more.

Grease Band - Lara Savory, Martin Carrick, Andy Shapland, Gary Pollington and Mark Richardson

The five-piece band led by Lara on keys gave good accompaniment to the musical numbers and I am sure that all the cast loved performing with a live band.

Millie Wilkins (Choreographer) The choreography routines were effective, making use of repeated patterns which included some iconic hand jive moves from the 1950's. The cast were precise in their mastery of the routines, dancing with energy and enjoyment. I particularly enjoyed the '*Beauty School Drop Out*' routine, '*Greased Lightening*' and '*Born to Hand Jive*'.

Karen Bird (Stage Manager) assisted by **Friends and Parents of SPT**

Back stage was well managed by Karen who ensured that the show ran smoothly with slick scene changes. These were well co-ordinated between the back-stage crew and members of the cast. The well-timed smoke for '*Beauty School Drop Out*' was very effective. I'm sure that the cast were pleased to have such an experienced stage manager to keep the back-stage area clear so that together with **Rachel Lockwood** and her team of chaperones, they could enter and leave the acting space safely.

Pete Ashton (Set Design) assisted by **Jeff Gilbert, Jemima Davy-Smith, John Billings and Kevin Tanner**

(Set Build) The set was based around a simple box set with blacks which opened to reveal a screen which was used for back projection in some scenes. Set pieces had been constructed by the team with an impressive part-built Greased Lightening car and a variety of steps, blocks and boxes to give multi-levels for the cast to work on. Marty's bedroom was nicely dressed with a pink quilted bedspread, cushions and curtains. The open window worked well and the set of lockers was very effective with opening doors and enough space to store a guitar! The disco lights set on at the back were a good feature, but adding some decorations to the school hall for the dance would have created even more of a party feel.

Pete Ashton (Lighting Design) **Ellen Hunter** (Lighting Operation) There was good use of disco light bars at the back of the stage in many of the scenes which added interest and colour to the lighting. I did feel though that at times, the stage was a little dark and would have benefitted from brighter lighting washes in some of the scenes. The alternating lighting of stage right and left was used to good effect in '*Summer Nights*' drawing the audience's eye to the boys and then the girls and the lighting cues were well timed.

Pete Ashton (Sound Design and Operation, Projection)

In general, the sound was good, although occasionally, some of the mics were distorted on the louds notes. The blend between the live band and the singers was good, but the band seemed a little unbalanced some of the time, with the piano, sax and guitar louder than the drums and bass which sounded rather distant. The sound effects were well cued and in particular, Marty's radio was very effective sounding authentic for a radio of the period complete with a few crackles.

I really liked the projection of adverts from the 1950's onto the screen on stage which caught my interest as soon as I entered the auditorium. Back projection was used to distinguish between locations and there were some very good projected back drops, but due to the small size of the screen between the blacks these were a little lost on occasions when all the cast were on stage.

Cher Billins, Heather Steward and Emily Pyke (Costumes)

The costumes were in the most part of the period with lovely 1950's tea dresses for the '*High School Hop*' and Vince looked very fine in his purple Teddy Boy suit. It was good to see the iconic Pink Ladies jackets, but I felt that pairing these with skinny jeans looked rather modern and using Capri pants and skirts would have been more authentic for the era. The Burger Palace Boys looked good in their leather jackets, but in 1950, their tee shirts would have been tucked in not loose. The cheer leader outfits were very appropriate and looked comfortable to wear and the printed Rydell High Tee-shirts were very effective. Using angel wings for teen angel was imaginative and they looked great with her silver sequinned dress, but for me the fairy wings for her backing singers worked less well. Dressing the girl greasers in overalls looked great and they were easy to move and dance in.

Derek Lockwood had done a very good job of sourcing a huge number of properties which were authentic and perfectly fitted the action on stage. The props really added to the production, and nothing had been missed.

Jessica Masseron (Drive in Movie Filming) The filming for the Drive in Movie was excellently done and was very cleverly devised by Jess.

Gordon Bird and Jessica Wilkins (Programme) **Jessica Wilkins, Catherine Wilkins and Lucy Fudge**

(Photography) This was another excellent, colourful and informative programme from the youth group which was full of interesting facts about the 1950's and the history of the musical Grease. I am always glad to see the songs listed and attributed to the singers and it was good to see rehearsal photographs included.

It has been fun to join you twice this weekend and lovely to see full houses with such enthusiastic audiences. I certainly feel like I have been transported back to 1950's America and the rock and roll era. Well done to everybody, have a good summer and good luck to all the leavers.

I look forward to joining you again next year.

Cate

NODA London District 13 Representative