



Society : Chelham Musical Theatre Company
Production : Happy As A Sandbag
Date : 07th October
Venue : Elgin Theatre
Report by : John C. Draper

Report**THE PRODUCTION**

The excellent programme notes cover everything there is to say about this show.

STAGING AND SET

This was a simple and hugely effective set designed by **STEVE URRY** and built by **STEVE TAYLOR & ALAN HOLMES**. The varied levels created a great ability for numbers almost to overlap and contributed to the great continuity. The sandbags were a great touch but the crowning glory was the inspirational use of the data projector to set the scenes. This was obviously a directorial decision as there was no such technical material available when this show was written and **ALAN CRUMPTON, STEVE URRY & STEVE TAYLOR** had done a brilliant job of research, collection, collation and presentation.

LIGHTING by **ANDY FRIEDLI**

This was excellently handled. Chamberlain's declaration of war was made even more emotional by the lighting. The levels were set just right for every scene and Andy managed to achieve the ultimate lighting success, in that his changes were subtly done, accurately timed and, above all, unobtrusive. After the acknowledgement during the final curtain the applause was well deserved.

SOUND by **MATT SMITH**

Generally, this was reasonably well done especially when linked to the projected scenes. There were times however when voices were lost or drowned by the music and it seemed the stage was under-miked. Use of individual microphones would have elevated the quality of sound. The sirens early in Act 1 were at just the right levels and created memories for those of us who can remember them sending shivers down the spine. The dogfight sound was very good.

COSTUME

ANITA ROLLINGSON & BETH SAUNDERS had done a great job, both with their choices of costume and their accurate grasp of the period look. The excellent variety of civilians and military personnel avoided the trap of stereotyped forties characters and the picture that Anita & Beth painted managed to be colourful whilst still reflecting the drabness of the age. Masterfully done.

THE CAST

This is a question of “where to start and finish?” From the great opening number the cast gave their all, with a concentration and commitment which did them huge credit.

With so many numbers **and** **inter**changing cast members my comments can only be brief or this review **would turn** into a volume and with my keyboard speed you wouldn't receive it until Christmas.

PETER BROOM, JOHN FOX & THE COMPANY got the show off to a rip-roaring start but the lack of amplification was already apparent as it was in *Let The People Sing* but the song was well sung with a strong chorus.

ANTHONY OGDEN made a wonderful Neville Chamberlain and got the most out of this emotive moment.

The first song to be heard with total clarity was *Roll Out The Barrel* and, as a result gained the first applause; the first of many more.

Knees Up Mother Brown lacked “oomph.”

The male voices were a bit weak for *When The Lights Go Up*

RICHARD OGDEN delivered the Churchill speech too quickly. Churchill allowed his pauses and almost ponderous delivery to emphasise the mood.

The Tommy Handley sketch needed the signature tune to start and finish but was well done especially PATSY CATCHPOLE'S Mrs Mopp, but MICK OWEN needed to use a slicker delivery

The Last Enemy was very well done indeed by BARRY DELL, PAUL NEVES, JON ALLEN & JOHN FOX.

SUSIE OGDEN sang *Johnny Head In Air* beautifully

Hitler's shortage in the reproduction department was a great number from the company and was very entertaining.

The Blackout scene was a bit scrappy **and** **needed** tightening up.

MICK OWENS was a brilliant Max **Miller** with an excellent snappy delivery with great moves and stage presence. Mick made the most out of the brilliant script.

JOHN FOX started his *Turned Out Nice Again* **over** the audience applause and was another example of the need for a microphone.

NATALIE BENNETT looked terrific as Jane with great movement and voice but the male characters were a bit weak as was JOHN JENNER'S delivery of *You Stepped Out Of A Dream*.

ALISON EUSTACE then presented an excellent Rita Hayworth with a very good rendition of *Long Ago & Far Away*.

The Home Guard sketch was simply silly

Lille Marlene was a first class, well-staged number. The two simultaneous versions were superb.

Whether everyone was looking forward to the interval or just got a surge of adrenalin you seemed to go up a gear. *This Is The Army* from the girls, *Praise The Lord*, and *That Lovely weekend* from SUSIE OGDEN were beautifully sung and showed the group's strength with every chorus number really belted out.

CLARE HILL'S *We'll Meet Again* was very well sung and although PATSY CATCHPOLE'S voice was not quite strong enough for *Room 504*, this was a stirring end to the first act.

Act 2 started off with a great emotive coupling of *The Warsaw Concerto* and a very good Adolf Hitler from PAUL NEVES.

Paul- Ihre Deutsch ist sehr gut und Ich habe jeder wort verstandet . If, Paul, you don't understand that, then your performance was even better, with a superb German delivery, accurately phrased and pronounced. (Mind you- my spell check certainly didn't understand it!)

The links between the two sections were excellent with that great walk down making the most of the multi level set.

ALISON EUSTACE has a wonderful voice but in *A Nightingale Sang* we couldn't hear it properly.

In Which We Serve was a great section with wonderful accents. FRANCIS SONES was beautifully powerful and we should have heard her singing more often.

Shoo Shoo Baby was another excellent slot. Good sound and moves from SUSIE OGDEN, FIONA JACOB & CLARE HILL followed a very good *Back To The Land* from the land girls and farmers

CAROLINE SMITH-WRIGHT & CLARE HILL as the cook and assistant were very good indeed, as was IMOGEN OSBORNE'S housewife but JOHN FOX & MARGARET BARNARD lost some words and their actions were a bit stilted with "*Chicken*" not easy to hear. This was a rather weak sketch.

RICHARD OGDEN played a great and very funny Radio Doctor.

Thingamabob had enough strong voices to make it very enjoyable with good moves. The duet was also good.

MIKE MCGOWAN's compere lacked enthusiasm and feeling but NATALIE BENNETT was excellent as the mannequin.

We couldn't hear BARRY DELL'S words in *Zoot Suit* but his final note showed what a good voice he has if only he uses more power.

The tap dancers during *The Fleet's In* presented a wonderful number and brought the song to life. The two officers could not be heard.

ANITA ROLLINGSON was difficult to hear as Carmen Miranda but her appearances in the chorus were outstanding.

MICK OWEN'S voice was not strong enough for "*Stage Door Canteen*"

The build up to the finale was great and RICHARD DOYLE'S transformation from Lord Haw Haw to Winston Churchill was well done.

JOHN FOX gave a very good Robb Wilton impression.

And then there was that excellent, building, wonderful finale which I shall cover in the next section. It was marvellous.

DIRECTION

JENNY CRUMPTON & JOHN JENNER created a well-crafted production which appealed to every emotion. It ranged from nostalgia to comedy, sadness to happiness and disaster to triumph. Just like life was then! The positioning and groupings were good with very tight direction apart from the very few exceptions I have already mentioned. The loss of voices should have been remedied and there were some scrappy bits but everyone especially the ensemble gave of their very best

Jenny & John had brought together a good team and turned them into a great one by getting a high level of commitment and enthusiasm from them.

I have already mentioned several highlights but there were many. The beautiful staging at the opening with the total immobility of the cast. Chamberlain's declaration of war and "*Blue Birds*" were great moments. The excellent linking of sound and visual effects and good slick continuity were another example of innovative direction.

I Vow To Thee My Country was brilliantly presented.

The rest of this section could have been included in the cast credits as well but I feel that the togetherness of the finale needs to be shared and I am also including NATALIE BENNETT'S choreography in this joint recognition.

I defy anybody not to have been moved by the marvellous last fifteen minutes.

The introduction to *There'll Always Be An England* was excellent and yet again the enthusiasm of the cast overcame the sound problems.

It was round about this point that I was so enthralled I stopped making notes so the rest of this is from memory.

The poppies, the British Legion standard bearers, the audience involvement and, above all, the music. All of it pure politically incorrect wonderful jingoism. And why not? We sometimes seem to have lost patriotism and are very good at self-denigration, so it was refreshing to be able to bask in a bit of pride.

CHOREOGRAPHY

NATALIE BENNETT'S move to Chesham last January has been very good fortune for the C.M.T.G.

Her arrangements and routines were most entertaining and her imagination became apparent from the start.

Natalie deserves high praise for creating great ensemble dances and building a highly motivated team to present them. There were many peaks, but standing out were; *This Is The Army*, *Zoot Suit*, and THE TAP DANCERS who brought an extra sparkle to the show.

After *The Gang's All Here*, (or thereabouts) there was a wonderful slow exit which was not only very effective, but also inspirational. (I made so many notes I can't position it exactly but you will identify it I'm sure). Natalie; Welcome to Buckinghamshire. You are going to be a great asset.

MUSIC

Tucked away at the beginning of the excellent show synopsis, I finally found an acknowledgement to REBECCA LOVEGROVE, your pianist, but unless I have had an attack of myopia the drummer remains anonymous. However, they both gave a good level of musical support. Although they were not responsible for the loss of voices, perhaps they could have reacted by dropping their volume slightly.

STAGE MANAGEMENT

STEVE URRY and his team never put a foot wrong. The whole production ran smoothly with great timing.

PROGRAMME

This was one of the best-produced programmes I have seen during the last two years. The content, layout, quality, photography and graphics were of the highest order with the lovely little wartime touches like the identity card. The show synopsis was fully comprehensive but it was the ambition to aim for such a high standard that worked so brilliantly. Congratulations to JENNY CRUMPTON for the compilation.

FRONT OF HOUSE

And instead of having panic attacks and hiding away with a gin & tonic, Jenny looked after the F.O.H. with her usual warmth and hospitality. The whole team organised a well-stewarded foyer and auditorium. The displays were a good idea and the model aircraft excellent

FINALLY

Actually, I think I've said most of it. This was a great production, and without the sound problems, would have been superb. With such a large cast and support team it has not been possible to mention everyone by name but you can all share in the glory of an excellent production. Best wishes for South Pacific.

Incidentally, after the curtain came down, I did make one more note: -

"Bloody Brilliant"

John C.Draper

This review has not in anyway been affected by my raffle prize, for which I thank you.