

Society : Maidenhead Musical Comedy Society
Production : Annie
Date : 8/11/24
Venue : Kenton Theatre, Henley
District : 14

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Show Report

Overall Impression

The musical Annie is a feel-good show full of optimism and hope set in 1933 against the background of the Great Depression in America and the looming Second World war II. It contrasts the luxury lifestyle of the billionaire Oliver Warbucks with the poverty and desperation of the down and outs in Hooverville and the young girls in the Orphanage. WC Fields is thought to have said “never work with children or animals” because they can be unpredictable and upstage the adults, but this is a musical that relies almost entirely for its success on exactly that with Annie, the other orphan girls and Sandy the dog having the best songs “Maybe”, “It’s a hard knock life”, “Tomorrow” and “You’re never dressed without a smile”.

The Maidenhead Musical Comedy Society were very fortunate to find a marvellous Annie in her first leading role, ten wonderful orphans and a cute dog that steal every scene they are in. They deliver the songs with plenty of character, lovely Ensemble movement and excellent singing volume that charms the audience. The adult characters are all well played but are regularly outshone by the younger cast.

Slickly staged with well-chosen projected back clothes that set the scenes quickly and effectively and an excellent seven-piece band under the stage, the cast convey the heartwarming sentiment and optimism of the songs without getting overly cutesy and sweet to create a very fine production of the show.

Cast

Young **Freya Weiss** in her first leading role is simply exceptional as Annie. From her first appearance to the finale, she dominates the scenes she is in with a confident clear voice and well-acted personality that wins your sympathy and admiration. We are easily convinced that this young girl could have influenced the President and Entrepreneur with her open honest charm. She delivers all the iconic numbers with great control and a fine voice and her version of “Tomorrow” which can sometime seem overly sentimental and sweet was simply superb and made all the more impressive by the challenge of keeping Sandy on a tight lead. Her interactions with Roosevelt and Warbucks were beautifully played. An exceptional talent and I look forward to seeing what she does next.

The support from the ten orphan girls was also excellent with a good range of actress adding to the charm. **Elsie Bignall , Antoinette Forsdick, Winnie Kendell- Brown, Lois Marshall, Alix Maxwell, Holly Maxwell, Ellie Metherell, ,Mia- Grace, Wood Lily Wright, and Emmy Nichols** as the youngest Molly established their relationships and personalities in the opening scene with good American accents and carried the strong Ensemble feel through the show. Their movement and singing in “Maybe”, “It’s a hard knock life”, and “You’re never dressed without a smile” was well rehearsed and executed with

an excellent volume and clarity to their singing. The business with Molly in the laundry basket was well done. They are at the heart of the show and were individually and collectively very good.

Tiffin as Sandy the dog was wonderfully trained and behaved and easily earned the “ah’s” from the audience as he trotted on and off the stage on his own as well as he starring role in “Tomorrow”.

It is tough for the adult performers to compete with such winning Girls and a dog which the story focuses on, but the cast of Principals and the Ensemble successfully created the host of other characters around them.

The three villains of the story were played with exaggerated over the top energy , almost as pantomime baddies revelling in their evilness. **Sarah Seabrook** played the continually drunk Miss Hannigan conveying her dislike for her charges, her desperate search for male company and sang through “gritted teeth” to good comic effect. **Alastair Ferguson and Sian Rolls** as Rooster Hannigan and Lily St Regis presented as Bonnie and Clyde style gangsters . Together they were excellent in “Easy Street” moving with a slinky rhythmic ease around the stage.

Tony Slevin made a strong well-acted Oliver Warbucks, looking the part and with good emotional range so we saw how Annie melted his business-like heart and won him over easily. **Peter Higley** was a cold calculating Franklin D Roosevelt carefully choosing his words with a Presidential air. The Warbucks’s staff were delightfully led by **Phoebe Wynne** as Grace Farrell with an air of the smart efficient secretary, disdain for Miss Hannigan and caring for Annie contributing well to her songs with Annie and Warbucks. Her first meeting with Miss Hannigan at the Orphanage was very well played by the two actresses. The butler, Drake was played by **Fraser Motion**, the maid Mrs Greer by **Ginnie Freeman** and the cook Mrs Pugh by **Pip Olding** and each created the loyal distinctive characterisations of the household staff with strong clear voices.

The NBC radio scene provided a good comic interlude with **Dominic Blecher** as the overly upbeat host, Bert Healy, accompanied by the Boylan Sisters (**Louise Evans, Pip Olding and Ginnie Freeman**) capturing the sound of those period radio adverts. Unfortunately, the blocking meant I could not see the Fred McCracken and his vent doll Wacky.

The adult chorus of **Janet Chidley, Emma Connelly, Sam Davis, Jill Dady ,Rhiannon Edwards, Naomi Hennesey, Nathan Jones and Charlie Connelly** provided good support as the Hooverville down and outs and the Warbucks servants with the men stepping forward well as The Cabinet in the reprise of “Tomorrow”.

Creatives

Hannah Stone, with the earlier direction of **Sarah Dunleavy**, created a well-paced show with good characterisations throughout which was generally well blocked (except for the NBC radio scene) to create good pictures that fitted the period and locations. The choreography by **Lucinda Belcher** flowed well from the narrative and never looked overcrowded or messy. The Orphaned girls’ routines were very well drilled and precise and created the show highlights with their versions of “Maybe”, “It’s a hard knock life”, and “You’re never dressed without a smile”. In particular the split of the orphans in “it’s a hard knock life” to those with mops and those without made a much more interesting routine. The lively synchronised movement in “Easy Street” around the stage was excellent establishing the slippery money grabbing characters and their relationship.

Neil Matthews and his band of six were wonderful with the brass section really coming to the fore in the overture to create the distinctive sound of the music. The singing was good throughout with clear diction and well-rehearsed. The sound mix was a very good blend enabling us to appreciate the music and lyrics of every song.

Scott Kitson's set and projection design was wonderful in its simplicity and effectiveness with extremely well-chosen projected images setting each scene efficiently. The pillars in Warbuck's Mansion seemed an unnecessary addition adding marginally to the setting time. The cast and crew cleared and set furniture very efficiently throughout assisting the flow of the show. The lighting was simple and effective and did not wash out the projections with a good switch of lighting to Annie at the desk at the end of Act 1.

The wardrobe by **John Wesson, Hannah Bolton, Emma Saunders, Sue Litson and Sarah Mawhinney** had a good period feel with excellent Orphan dresses and aprons, a good variety of dresses for Miss Hannigan, a very smart suit for Warbucks and appropriate costumes for his staff. Annie's coat definitely had the feel of a rich gift to the child. The iconic red dress for Annie looked right (although the blue dress looked ill fitting) and I was pleased to see the clichéd curly red wig for Annie was avoided! The addition of furs added to the period feel. The Hooverville residents did look rather too clean and well to do for the setting.

Props by **Hilary Wilson and Hannah Bolton** were well chosen with the mops well used, appropriate alcohol bottles, an excellent radio mic, the scene setting down and out's stoves, the Mona Lisa painting, star and stripes flags, and Annie's Lockett all playing important roles in the narrative.

The programme was clear with helpful bio's and plenty of ads although the NODA advert had not been updated for the new logo, byline and messaging. See this link:

[Programme and Poster Competition - NODA](#)

This was a very good production led by Annie and the Orphans with charm and great skill and fully justifying Miss Hannigan's line, "The next thing you know they will make a musical about her". Sometimes Annie can be played irritatingly too sweetly but here she shines as a star who can change people and brings out the hope and optimism required to navigate through dark economic and war threatening clouds and in an unstable world, we can all aspire to be an Annie.

Nick Humby
District 14.