

Society : MMCS
Production : **WHISTLE DOWN THE WIND**
Date : Saturday 9th April 2016
Venue : Desborough Suite, Maidenhead
Report by : Gordon Bird, NODA Representative, Area 14



Show Report

Of course I am of an age that I remember the 1961 film of the same name featuring Alan Bates (as the Man) and Hayley Mills (as Kathy) that was adapted from the book by Mary Hayley Bell. The 1996 musical with music by Andrew Lloyd Webber and lyrics by Jim Steinman, moves the location from Lancashire to the “deep south” of America.

Maidenhead Musical Comedy Society (MMCS) chose this somewhat different show and was rewarded by an accomplished performance. This was the second showing, having performed a matinee earlier in the day, but you would have never had known as the energy and concentration looked fresh. The show was very well cast with some fine principal performances and supported by a well disciplined chorus.

SWALLOW (EMILY SLATTER)

What a fabulous performance by this young lady! Her signing was delightful, every note pitch perfect. Her tenderness towards the Man was accurately judged although I would have liked little more of a contrast shown in feelings towards Amos – does she fancy him or not, or just using him? Emily looked totally relaxed on stage and her interaction with her siblings showed a good understanding of the role. Congratulations on this performance.

MAN (RYAN STEVENS)

This is a very different role for Ryan and one that shows how versatile a performer he is. His vocal performance was once again of a very high standard and his interaction with Swallow was very well observed. I would have thought his movement would have been a lot slower in his opening scene, when first discovered by Swallow, which allows more of a contrast later on to show swifter, more anxious movements. However, overall this was a very impressive performance by Ryan as the man on the run, one of the best I have seen.

CANDY (TILLY ROSE MITCHELL)

It was lovely to see Tilly performing a different role. I would never have guessed that she came into the part with only six week’s notice as she looked totally comfortable in her role. She has a lovely voice and she sung with huge amount of character and confidence. She displayed the part with a unique take which I felt worked very well indeed.

AMOS (JACK BRENNAN)

Jack has a wonderful singing voice that he used very well indeed. His solo (*Let's Make A Promise*) was very performed and he showed excellent interaction with his duets. I felt Jack looked a little overwhelmed in his scene with Candy (*Tire Tracks*) and needed to be more in command, but his relationship with Swallow showed a good understanding of the character and his feelings towards her and was very well performed (*A Kiss is A Terrible Thing to Waste*).

BRAT (LAURA BRISTOW) & POOR BABY (JET WHEELER)

I thought both these young performers excelled on the stage. Jet looked totally relaxed and clearly enjoyed every moment. I loved **Laura's** characterisation of Brat. Their singing was very accurate and they blended very well with Swallow. **Jet** showed great confidence and wonderful comic timing in his delivery. I particularly enjoyed *No Matter What (reprise)* as this was wonderfully performed by all three. Well done **Laura** and **Jet** for your performances – you should be very pleased with your performances – your characters were believable, your interaction was very well observed and your vocal delivery could not be faulted.

BOONE (MATT FILMORE)

Matt always performs to a very high standard and this was no different. He oozes confidence on stage and his portrayal of Swallow, Brad and Poor Baby's father was played flawlessly. His singing was once again note perfect. His relationship with the children was deftly applied, especially his relationship with Swallow. Well done on another accomplished performance.

EDWARD (SCOTT KITSON)

This was a very proficient performance by Scott who really understood his character. I thought *Cold* was very well sung indeed, showing excellent control and just the right amount of energy.

PREACHER (DAREN BRANDON)

Daren presented good clear vocals in the song *Wrestle with the Devil*. As with all of the leading vocalists, it had good pitching, good diction and very well performed.

SHERIFF (TREVOR BEGLEY)

A nice little role this, and Trevor performed the character of the Sheriff very well. His song *For The Sake of the Children* was convincingly portrayed. His movement around the stage was correct for his stature within the community.

CHILDREN

All of the children were exceptionally well directed, all knowing exactly what to do, where to stand, when to come on or off stage. Their movement had been very well rehearsed and looked like they

enjoyed their performances. Forgive me, I could not work out who started *No Matter What*, but this young lady started the song very well indeed. In fact, all of the soloists sang very well. I noted that many of the soloists were not using head microphones and this sets a huge task to be heard over the orchestra. It is a credit to you all that I heard every word that was sung, so a huge well done! I noted that **Caitlin Lacey** was one of the quieter ones and hopefully this experience will give you confidence to sing louder in future (I heard you but only just – you have a fine voice so don't be afraid to be heard!) I thought **Bella Hooper** was very confident young performer who has wonderful stage presence. But it is unfair to single out any one performer as they all did very well and hope that they enjoyed this experience and go on to perform more shows in the future.

TOWNSFOLK

This production is quite difficult for the chorus – they don't really have too much of an opportunity to present any characters and several of their scenes they are presented as a "Greek chorus". I felt that this was performed very well indeed – their entrance and exits were superbly executed, very disciplined indeed. The finale of act one was quite chilling with the chorus eerily moving into the audience with their makeshift weapon to hunt for the escapee. The contrast to the children could not be more striking. I would have liked some kind of characterisation, perhaps in the opening number *The Vaults of Heaven* and again in "hoe down". But this may well have been a directorial decision, to make the "adults" appear dehumanised, showing a contrast to the innocence of the children, and certainly was very effective.

DIRECTOR (SARAH DUNLEAVY)

Congratulations Sarah on a very well directed show. The chorus and the children were particularly well drilled and all of the principal characters were well drawn. I thought the casting was spot on with all the main roles performing very well indeed. Movement was very well defined and looked easy (which I am sure it wasn't which shows how well it was conceived and delivered). I liked the setting of the end of act one which was very well thought out and powerful.

MUSICAL DIRECTOR (NEIL MATTHEWS)

Neil, once again you have provided a wonderful audio treat, as all of the singers sounded wonderful. The voices complimented each other flawlessly and all of the principals were a delight to listen to. The blend of sounds was very well managed which is sometimes an issue with so few men, but it did sound very rounded. The orchestrated sound is always a treat, far richer than a backing track and more rewarding too. The balance between the orchestra and singers was very well observed and at no time were either out of control.

CHOREOGRAPHER (CARA WRIGHTSON)

This is quite a difficult show to set as there are not many dance opportunities but when necessary, Cara certainly set about some nice movements in the show, with *Cold* being very well performed. I was concerned when the opening number started that this was going to be too static but fortunately this was saved by the intervention of some well rehearsed, slick movement by the ensemble. The cast

were well rehearsed with everyone knowing what was expected of them. A special mention to **Hannah** who performed the “dream sequence” as the mother, very well indeed and this was nicely set.

STAGE MANAGER (ALICIA WALKER)

The stage was very well managed by Alicia and her team. Scene changes were very promptly executed. It was great to see the stage crew dressed up in character, wearing chequered shirts and fitting into the scenes perfectly. This added to the production and helped make the scene changes appear quicker and natural.

LIGHTING (LIAM BEGLEY & LILY BEGLEY)

The lighting plot was very well designed and the evening I watched, all of the cues were excellently prompt. The range of colours that were imaginatively used ensured that there was sufficient interest throughout the songs and the production. The lighting never out shone the cast but complimented the action appropriately. The lighting of Candy was set a little in darkness at one stage but she quickly moved into the light and the rest of the show was set perfectly.

SOUND (BRIAN COX)

The sound of effects for the thunder clap and the motorbike was superb. It can be so easy to get the levels or the cues wrong, but both were executed with precision and at a believable level. The balance of the singers and the orchestrated sound was very good. All of the head microphones were properly applied (only once was aware of something brushing against a mic). Again, I have seen many shows where the microphones have been poorly dressed meaning an uncomfortable evening for the performer and for the audience. However, this was not the case on this evening and it is a pleasurable experience when it is done this well.

COSTUMES (JOHN WESSON)

All of the costumes looked authentic to the period and location. The sheriff’s uniforms looked just right. I thought perhaps the children’s costumes a little too clean as though they should appear a little bit dirty, considering they were outdoors and on the land. All of the costumes appear to fit, which must have taken quite a lot of effort with the youngsters (as they do have a tendency to grow unexpectedly at their age!).

PROPERTIES (JOHN WESSON)

Overall the properties looked very authentic, and the motorbike looked wonderful. I did not think the bar would have had pewter drinking vessels and thought they would more than likely had glass bottles or glasses. The use of the white and red cloth over the backdrop worked very well to provide the setting of the opening Chapel scene. The radio on the kitchen table looked very authentic to the period.

MAKEUP

The makeup was generally well applied although I would have liked the children to have been a little dirty (they looked far too clean). The Man's makeup was just right - he looked like he had been living rough and scrambled over fields. The application of grey to Boone was just right, aging the actor enough for us to believe he is a parent, but the back of the head looked like it was overlooked.

SET

The set consisted of a windmill down stage right and some dairy churns down stage left, all in front of the tabs which gave the immediate appearance of the Southern America countryside. In front of the backdrop was a wooden construction that resembled a barn and cleverly used for the other locations, like the chapel. A truck was moved off and on stage that presented the inside and outside of the farm house. This was very well constructed and was neatly and swiftly moved on and off stage. The set was completed by the use of straw bales that gave the stage depth but also provided areas of the cast to sit or lie on. I felt the constant moving on and off stage of these items slightly distracting at times (this is by no means the fault of the society, as they stage crew are to be praised on the swiftness) but more to the insistence of modern musicals to introduce multiple locations. The only thought I had was that perhaps the bales could have been set down stage right instead of the windmill? However, the stage was well constructed, allowing sufficient space for all of the action without any blocking issues.

FRONT OF HOUSE

We were made to feel very welcome by Sue and her front of house team. It was a very enjoyable evening and my partner and I felt very relaxed.

PROGRAMME

This was a good quality programme at a reasonable price (£1.50). It contains all of the usual information with clear photographs, interesting biographies and was supported with some excellent graphics. I recently paid £3.50 for a programme that was far inferior in quality and information – so well done for producing a good read at a reasonable price.

All of the principal roles were especially strong and once again MMCS provided a strong vocal performance that was a delight to listen. I look forward to a very different production in the autumn of Calamity Jane.

A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to read 'Gordon Bird', with a stylized flourish at the end.

Gordon Bird
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