



Society : BROS Theatre Company  
Production : Guys and Dolls  
Date : 2<sup>nd</sup> June 2011  
Venue : The Minack Theatre, Cornwall  
Report by : Tony Austin (NODA Rep for London District 8)

## Report

Seizing the opportunity of the gloriously fine weather and our presence only seven miles past the other end of Cornwall and discovering that there might be returned tickets available on the day for BROS's sold-out production, my wife and I decided that we could risk a visit to renew our memories of the open-air cliff-side arena which is the Minack Theatre just outside Porthcurno, and found ourselves with ideal seats about four rows back from the versatile stage area. A glance at the programme showed that we had last seen them there in 1999 for *Anything Goes*, although as we remember the weather then the first Act might have been better described as *Singin' in the Rain*. Happily the 2011 weather remained ideal, with no noise from planes or boats to mar our enjoyment.

The programme seemed a little apologetic about the inability of the Company to display the spectacular scenery they would have used in a normal theatre, although what better spectacle could one have than the Cornish sea coast in the evening sunlight, and the New York location of most of the action was nicely indicated by a cut-out of the Chrysler Building with two very large dice not only giving a clue to the nature of the story but converting as different faces were revealed into the newspaper stall, the Hot Box nightclub and the sign to welcome us to Havana, while a revolving header sign to a prominent entrance and some clever elasticated noticeboard covers made similar changes to the other side of the wide sweep of the stage where the Mission Hall normally lodged. And when what had appeared to be part of the solid concrete of the stage later revealed a manhole cover and gamblers disappearing down it shortly arrived through a drain into the green-fogged sewer for their underground game, no one could have wished for a better setting. First congratulations then to the scenery designers as realised by **Jill Wilson** and constructed by **Chris Pike** and **Cast Members**, and to the Stage Team under SM **Drew Barnes**, constantly shifting furniture (often while a scene continued, especially for the three separate night clubs shown in the Havana sequence) and to the well-drilled cast members assisting in the more major changes.

Second congrats to everyone involved in the Sound Design and Operation under **Stuart Vaughan**, which enabled the whole cast to get their words heard clearly throughout the show. The balance and subtlety needs no further illustration than the *Fugue for Tinhorns* opening, where each of the three interweaving parts achieved prominence at the appropriate times and faded again to give that prominence to another. For the confidence with which this and the rest of the music was performed by the cast, congratulations also to MD **Martin Wilcox** for training in rehearsal and control during performance, where his band excelled whether accompanying, underscoring or covering changes.

With the first Act performed in glorious sunlight, the lighting team and the riggers did not cross my mind, except to admire the nerve of them all with lights and crew perched precariously (it seemed) on rock outcrops, and (as a tribute to **Rob Arundel**'s super design) I didn't notice the gradual transition from natural to artificial light until scene changes took place in semi-darkness. Equal expertise from the Costume Team under Wardrobe Mistress **Wendy Godwin**, with everything seeming right (including the more substantial *Take Back Your Mink* costumes needed for playing in the open air), and from the Hair, Wigs and Make-Up team (Design by **Louise Turnbull**) with fine contrasts between the Missioners and other characters.

The **Ensemble**, with the men sticking mainly to their individual characters as Gamblers and the ladies split (with some overlap) between Hot Box Dolls, Mission Band and Runyonland Chorus (including an anonymous drunk with several starring spots), played their parts to the full, after making light of the stepped access involved in every entrance to the stage. And their steps and movements on stage were superbly synchronised and presented with panache to reach the farthest and highest areas of this steepest of auditoria. Using ladies to augment the men in *The Oldest Established* and turning the third verse of the title number into a chorus with them involved worked tremendously well with varied choreography from **Melanie Edwards**, **Diego Avila**, **Edz Barrett** and **Gita Singham-Willis**, and when the twelve genuine sinners turned up at the Mission accompanied by them the humour of the frantic improvising of extra seats for the unexpected crowd was only topped by the best mass representation of waves (Mexican and otherwise) ever seen in a Mission. In Havana, the three very different dances for the Night Clubs added welcome variety. No support from the ladies being possible in the sewer scene, the men alone took part in the *Crapshooters' Dance* and exceeded all expectations with perfect co-ordination (no slacking in the back row when the audience is so steeply raked) of the varied steps for the uncut version, only to be capped by their moves for *Luck Be a Lady*. The Hot Box Dolls' routines were rather shorter, but were smartly performed and their characterisations were well maintained both on and off stage.

Individual roles were nicely characterised with lines pointed for best meaning not only by named characters Rusty Charlie (**Ian Nethersell**), Harry the Horse (**Berni Messenger**) and menacing Big Jule (**Charles Halford**), with Benny Southstreet (**Chris Morris**) showing together with Nicely Nicely Johnson (**Carl Smith**) a fine way with the title song (and dance) before the latter's triumphant *Sit Down, You're Rockin' the Boat*, brilliantly put over, gave us a high spot in Act 2. **Nigel Cole** made a louche Lieutenant Brannigan, an effective interpretation I had not seen before, as was the completely unsympathetic General Cartwright of **Caroline Hayes**, until transformed at the prayer meeting, while **Stuart Turnbull** excelled with the traditional milk-of-human-kindness Arvide utterly convincingly performed and a really beautifully sung *More I Cannot Wish You*. A word for the **Mission Band** as well, instrumentally humorous and acting in character throughout.

I wouldn't fancy playing Sky Masterson as my first lead in a musical, but **Chris Alaru** got the character's aloofness and cynical detachment, showing great authority especially in *Luck Be a Lady* where the direction had him circling the chorus as only possible in this auditorium, and ended up meekly as Brother Obadiah in the Mission Band, captivated not merely by **Rhian Roberts**'s Sarah Brown, the perfect Mission Doll with the exact period hairstyle, but apparently by her religion as well. Putting over her message with conviction while showing the doubts placed in her mind by Sky, she sang sweetly, made a lot of her tipsiness in *If I Were a Bell* (with his reaction to the Chemistry Lesson line indicating the moment of epiphany which I had never before realised) and after the further revelation in her scene with Adelaide decided to change his ways tomorrow.

I first thought **Steve Green** as Nathan Detroit was trying too hard to get his words and their humour over to the audience, but gradually realised the size of the auditorium and an audience not familiar with theatre and especially not with clever dialogue of this nature, meant they needed warming up, which they did from *The Oldest Established* and the telephone call to appreciate the glorious humour as in the Sewer scene and *Sue Me* (with a couple of new words an improvement in the lyric) all beautifully played, while **Kerry Magee**'s perfect interpretation of Adelaide scored all through with an accent at once eccentric and fully understandable, every line spoken or sung judged perfectly for intonation and physical presentation to emphasise both the humour and the pathos, the epitome of the dumb broad, played with the benefit of intelligence and understanding. Superb!

My thanks to Directors **Loz Keal** (Principals) and **Edz Barrett** (Ensemble) and everyone else involved in this great show, which made my journey well worth while, even the return through the narrow lanes in a hairily speeding queue of traffic followed by some even hairier Cornish fog!