

BROS Theatre Company

Oh, Kay! • May 2006 • Hampton Hill Playhouse

REVIEW

A seldom-seen pearl was revealed last week by BROS at The Hampton Hill Playhouse. In 1926, in the middle of US prohibition, the Gershwin brothers decided to write a musical about bootleggers... and to invite that archetypal English eccentric, P.G. Wodehouse to write the lyrics! The result was Oh, Kay!, a comic medley of marital misunderstandings.

The bootleggers wait in a beach mansion on New York's Long Island for the booze run to put ashore. Their leader is Shorty, a wise-cracking hoodlum, energetically played by Stuart Harris. The runners' ship is the yacht of 'Pops' an English aristocrat, the Earl of Blandings; and by gad Jonathan Simmons was magnificent in this role. Even when drunk as a lord, he kept his stiff upper lip, and sang splendidly.

The house has been shut up for the winter, so the hoods are surprised when Jimmy Winters, its wealthy owner, appears. Not only is he on his honeymoon, but a 14-strong troop of dancing girls, The Cottontails (named after their patchy suntans!) also arrives. Rachael Hughes' choreography of these leggy lovelies included some dazzling tap sequences.

The warm timbre of Chris Morris's singing enhanced his lively performance as Jimmy, a man struggling with the possibility that his new marriage to (the somewhat inconstant) Constance might not be valid. Lizzy Ross's portrait of the bride had a tangy mordant edge. The cameo role of the pedantic Judge Appleton, the bride's father, was played by Gary Sherwood (yes, the Sadlers Wells' principal dancer of the 1960's!).

The apple(ton) cart is truly upset by the wily, flirtatious Kay, gorgeously played and beautifully sung by Sue Astbury, who really brought the musical standard, "Someone to Watch Over Me" to vivid life.

Director Wesley Henderson Roe, MD Phillip Shute and his quartet and the BROS production team have polished this pearl to give us a show that is a lot more than just Oh Kay!.

Mark Aspen
Richmond & Twickenham Times

REVIEW

Can't say we weren't warned: Oh Kay was trailed from the start, by director Wesley Henderson Roe, as a total contrast to the flash and precision of Hot Mikado, an opportunity to indulge in a bit of harmless fluff, with a preposterous plot (more preposterous than Mikado?) and a couple of hummable tunes.

Thus were our expectations managed, and surprise, surprise exceeded. The achievement was helped by a genuinely funny book, highly pleasing design, especially in the costume department, effective and evocative choreography from debutante choreographer Rachel Hughes, who made the most of the considerable talent available a delightful blend of familiar

and new faces (and bodies!) - and some strong individual performances.

That said, it did have its minor disappointments. It's not unusual, half an hour into what is essentially a farce, for an audience to be wondering what on earth is going on. However, most pennies should have dropped by the interval, and if a degree of incomprehension persisted, it was down to a tendency by some of the principals to throw away some key lines (I don't actually recall ever being told that the mysterious young lady's name was Kay, although it eventually became apparent through a process of elimination) and with them, some great comic opportunities. This was a shame, because the book is packed with extremely funny gags, verbal and sight.

When they worked, though, they really worked. The lunch table scene, which could so easily not have gone disastrously wrong, was deftly handled and got its due applause. Ditto the number for chained trio: how did they do that?! And "Nonsense, Constance" is a marvellous line why have I never heard that before?

As far as the individual characters are concerned, Stuart Harris, in the challenging role of Shorty was excellent physically and he sang well. However, the comedy in the lib was not always clearly articulated or sustained.

The audience warmed to Chris Morris's Jimmy: he really is developing into a strong comedy actor, and his singing shows considerable promise.

Sue Astbury, always a strong performer, came into her own in the second act, although vocally did seem to be showing some signs of tiredness.

Jonathan Simmons' (what a find for BROS!) Bertie-by-another-name was a splendidly silly ass, and Lizzy Ross was wonderfully imperious as Constance.

The part of Larry Potter did not give Edz Barrett the chance to strut his stuff in the way that Pooh Bah memorably did. However, he provided solid support to the principals. Alan O'Shea was a revelation as Jansen, although he will need to slow down his delivery in future, and Gary Sherwood's Judge was straight out of The Philadelphia Story.

A tight band, led by Philip Shute, and the usual seamless backstage and technical support, not to mention the excellent front of house staff, all helped to create a thoroughly entertaining evening that exceeded expectations - and not just because those who attended the post-show party were treated to the spectacle of Wes in a bunny girl outfit!

Jim Trimmer
Chorus Lines
