

BROS Theatre Company

HONK! • OCTOBER 2006 • ARTHUR COTTERELL THEATRE

Review

What a quacker of a show! Whoops, sorry, mustn't do that! For puns per square inch, Honk is already top of the pecking order. And as librettist Anthony Drewe's musical is based on Hans Christian Andersen's classic, *The Ugly Duckling*, the puns are awfully ornithological.

For its first production this season BROS has taken wing and migrated to ACT, the new Arthur Cotterell Theatre in Kingston, where the combination of Wesley Henderson Roe's set and Edward Pagett's lighting created a shimmering blue lake next to a muddy farmyard. Here Ugly and his four siblings emerge from their eggs, the pride of mother duck Ida but to the mixed feelings of Drake, energetically played by Jim Trimmer. Most of the farmyard animals, such as Maureen the moorhen (Janet Simpson) and Turkey (Chris Morris) are repelled by Ugly, but the aristocratic mandarin duck, Grace (Lynne Shirley) is more diplomatic.

The trouble is that Ugly, played with bemused innocence by Andy Clarke, is "different". Nevertheless, a mother's love is blind and Ida dotes on him, as is made clear in their duet, *Hold your Head up High*. Lizzy Ross delicately spiced this comic role with piquant pathos and superb singing in solos such as *Every Tear a Mother Cries*.

Nevertheless, Ugly is lured away by The Cat, seductive, sleek and suave. Bryan Cardus excelled in this role. His powerful singing voice spelt out the menace behind the silvery sheen. His duet with Ugly, *Play with Your Food*, was a joy. Fortunately for Ugly, The Cat is distracted by Queenie, the female of the species É and how! Sue Astbury oozed with feline sensuality and their rumbas and tangos were purr-inducing. Lowbutt, the pedigree hen (Karen Prior) is not amused at the prospect of her companionship with Queenie being usurped.

Zoë Harvey-Lee's costumes and Louise Turnbull and Lauren Mathis' hair styling and make-up wittily hinted at the character of each animal. And Ugly meets many animals who try to reunite him with his family, while back at home the TV press in the form of Jackie Daw, played by the ever exuberant Robbin Pierce, exploits Ida's distress at the loss of her chick.

Among those who befriend Ugly, is an air-force squadron of geese, led by Greylag, robustly played by Carl Smith. However, their nimble manoeuvres, choreographed by Edz Barrett, come to grief at the end of the humans' shotguns, due to the treachery of The Cat. As another friend, Bullfrog, who was complete with Noo-Yark accent and be-sequined bowler, Lawrence Keal shone with iridescent irrepressibility in a sparkling performance.

Of course Ugly transmogrifies into a wonderful swan and meets a beautiful lady swan, Penny elegantly portrayed by Claire Smith. They do all live happily ever after because they stay on the lake with foster-mum Ida instead of leaving on the migration with Penny's socially mobile family.

Musical Director Nick Saunders with his skilled sextet of musicians gave a lively and well-balanced performance of George Stiles' highly animated score.

Director Clare Henderson Roe has hatched and incubated a fully-fledged swan of a show.

Mark Aspen
Richmond & Twickenham Times

Review

So much has been said and written about this show since its emergence from the National Theatre a few years ago and indeed this is my third visit to Honk! in little over a year as its popularity grows amongst societies. "Honk!" is George Stiles' and Anthony Drewe's musical version of the wonderful Hans Christian Andersen ugly duckling story. It won the Olivier award for Best New Musical in 2000, beating The Lion King, which was favourite for the prize at the time. It is a family musical, where the cast largely take the guise of farmyard animals. The music has some strong ballads, is catchy and quirky, the lyrics are witty and decidedly tongue-in-cheek. The cast seemed to have as much fun as the audience on the night I attended. In addition there were plenty of parts to fill and there were several opportunities for strong cameos within the story.

The brief story - Ugly is born, of course, as a Duckling but is soon becomes clear that he is no ordinary Duck. Mocked on the farmyard, pursued by the ever-hungry Cat, Ugly finds himself lost on a nearby marsh in the middle of a duck-shoot and embarks on an odyssey through the countryside, meeting a battery of colourful characters and finding himself, and love, along the way.

Often performed by kids, this adult production of Honk! had the necessary smattering of fable about it. It had moments of panto with boos and hisses not far away and in some instances, adults being kids, being animals. This was a very pleasant evening's entertainment by BROS Theatre Company under the Direction of Clare Henderson Roe.

This is a new venue on the circuit and on the surface seems to have worked well. The Arthur Cotterell Theatre holds significantly more than Parkshot and generally has a more modern feel. Although I gather there still are some Security and Front of House issues to be ironed out.

Clare Henderson Roe and her fellow Production Team did a sterling job in achieving the relatively high standards they did. Nick Sanders was safely at the helm as Musical Directors with the hidden away band situated behind the stage and performers benefiting from monitors. Edz Barratt's choreography was tight and generally uncomplicated to suit all standard of movers. When the ensemble were in unison it was very pleasant on the eye.

Clare and Wes (as Stage Designer) went with a fairly minimalist set which encompassed the ducklings nest and a balcony for the Cat but allowed ample space for the significant amount of ensemble work.

To allow a sparse stage to really work, the Lighting plot has to be impressive and I feel Edward Pagett and his team of assistants achieved this, despite as I understand it a significant lack of available power within the auditorium. This was backed up by Dave Gates to his usual high standards. There was the odd strange microphone explosion in Act One but this had cleared up through Act Two.

The Wardrobe team overseen by Zoe Harvey Lee and including hair and wigs had a task on their hands. The performers are not supposed to dress up as animals but merely convey the characteristics and I felt the balance was spot on. The Cat with the sleek suit and gallons of hairspray, the ducklings in yellow school wear, the Frog etc were all examples of evidence that much thought and effort had been committed.

Amongst the performances, there are literally too many to mention each and every one but here are a few observations;

The maternal character of 'Ida' has plenty business in the early part of the show and I thought Lizzy Ross brought across just about the right amount of sentiment and sung pleasantly. This was the first time that I had seen Jim Trimmer in a leading role as 'Drake' and whilst I couldn't fault the effort, I never quite believed that there was any tenderness in his portrayal. Contrastingly, Andy Clarke showed all the vulnerability and shy cuteness that the part of 'Ugly' demands. There was a youthful naivety there for all to see and appreciate. Similarly, Bryan Cardus as the 'Cat' was sleek and slick at the same time. Bryan was extremely cheesy when required and played the panto baddie to a T. Janet Simpson as the busybody moorhen 'Maureen' was always involved and teamed up well with 'Ida' for the delightful 'The Joys of Motherhood'. Carl Smith emerged towards the end of Act One as 'Greylag the Goose' and was suitably bumptious as the old school Wing Commander. There were touches of Arthur Lowe in there if I'm not mistaken. Carl was ably assisted by his gaggle of geese flying in formation, impressively deputised by Debs McDowell as 'Dot'. 'Wild Goose Chase' was an impressive formation number which utilised most of the cast. 'Queenie' and 'Lowbutt' played by Sue Astbury and Karen Prior respectively gave an insightful rendition of 'It Takes All Sorts' at the beginning of Act Two. Just as the audience were settling in, onto stage burst Lawrence Keal as the 'Bullfrog'. This is a gem of a cameo part for a comedian. The part has a fantastically memorable showstopping song and the potential of a costume to die for. Lawrence was a real crowd favourite on the night I attended. Claire Smith as 'Penny' portrayed all the elegance and grace required for this small but important role as 'Ugly's' love interest. There were other stalwart characterizations and as an ensemble this particular worked well together.

I enjoyed the programme which was an interesting and informative read but could have benefited from short biogs and a mention of NODA.

Once again thank you for inviting me to the Arthur Cotterell Theatre and best wishes for your 2007 productions and in particular "Man of La Mancha", a show I have performed in twice.

I looking forward to seeing you again soon and if I can be of any assistance at any time, please do not hesitate to contact me.

Stephen MacVicar
NODA Rep London Area 3