

Singin' in the Rain • January 2004 • Richmond Theatre

REVIEW

Any production of 'Singin' in the Rain' will always automatically be compared to the charming Gene Kelly, Debbie Reynolds and Donald O'Connor (who died in September last year) film of 1952. Another of the 'show within a show' genre, the stage version sticks fairly faithfully to the screen version. The plot centres on movie star Don Lockwood and his efforts to keep his silent-screen popularity when films were just making the transition to sound. The setting is the Twenties, a time of uncertainty for many established silent movie stars. It has a succession of pleasant songs, including 'Good Morning', 'Make 'em Laugh', 'Moses Supposes', 'You are my lucky Star' and, of course, 'Singin' in the Rain'. I can't honestly say that 'Singin' in the Rain' is amongst my favourite musicals and it was an ambitious option but I thought that BROS pulled off a very creditable production.

The show is indeed extremely 'bitty' with around 21 scene changes and it takes a while to settle down as we are introduced to the characters and their various backgrounds. The company looked very well rehearsed under Rachel Moorhead as Director. Some of the high points of the production were the excellent cine films made by the cast to portray the silent films of the time, such as 'The Duelling Cavalier'. Although there were plenty of them, they were all entertaining. I felt the 'Make 'em Laugh' number was a little under utilised. Jeff tried manfully to keep it going but there was insufficient content and activity to sustain the number. This was more than made up for with the 'rain scene' which was a fitting end to a slightly overlong first half. On the technical side, there was a nice scene with Don and Kathy as they enter an empty sound stage where with the artifice of a cyclorama and a wind machine. Don creates a sunset and a light breeze to serenade her. This worked a treat and in general, despite difficulties with faulty in-house equipment, both lighting and sound teams ably supported the cast. The cine films worked like clockwork and there was a strong Lighting plot. Excellent costumes assisted the production, bringing colour and the required authenticity, especially relevant to the period costumes, to carry off such a show.

William Morris as Musical Director looked to be enjoying himself and was in a control of a very youthful looking orchestra. There were some strange notes at times in the pit but they undoubtedly enhanced the production. Sharon Baker's choreography was quirky, fresh and at all times enjoyable, Never better than during 'All I do is Dream of You' and 'Moses Supposes'. A hard working troupe of dancing girls assumed the bulk of the front line work but there was plenty for the slightly less nimble.

There was strength in depth in this BROS TC principal line-up. Bryan Cardus gave a commanding performance as Don Lockwood, using his powerful singing to good effect but could perhaps have introduced a little light and shade on softer moments. Jeff Chinappen and his very expressive face provided much of the comedy as Lockwood's sidekick, Cosmo Brown. These two teamed up well together and proved to be pretty handy hoofers. Our aspiring actress and dancer Kathy Selden was played suitably meekly by Hannah Rogers. Hannah possesses a very pleasant voice and proved this in 'Would You' as the contrast to the frightful shrill warblings of Lina Lamont. The afore-mentioned Miss Lamont was given the full works by Maria Waters who was careful not to tip this delightful character over the top.

The stiff studio owner RF Simpson was played by Charles Halford who didn't look comfortable with his prop cigar. John Nugent played Roscoe Dexter with good comedy timing, a straight face and a dry wit. Billy Conway as the 'Principal Tenor' showed off a wonderful voice in his rendition of 'Beautiful Girls'. There was excellent support from Lizzie Brignall as the mouthpiece Dora Bailey, Sarah Trotman as Lina's confidante Zelda Zanders, Denise Truscott (Ms Dinsmore) and Edz Barrett as the impressive elocution teachers. All of whom stamped their own individual mark on each part. A mention also for the two young lads who put in a very slick, if a little brief performance as the young Don and Cosmo.

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NODA Rep

I must admit to a woeful ignorance of the productions by the Barnes and Richmond Operatic Society, now the BROS Theatre Company (BROS for short), which is a shame, as they have a remarkable record of shows they have mounted, ranging from Gilbert and Sullivan to Rodgers and Hart, picking up such lesser luminaries as Sandy Wilson and Maltby and Shire along the way.

Their production of *Singin' in the Rain* came, therefore, as a very pleasant shock. I must admit that the playing of the overture caused me a few nasty moments, but thereafter it was joy all the way.

As practically everyone knows, the plot of *Singin' in the Rain* concerns the advent of sound, in Hollywood, and the careers it ruined.

In the tradition of films of that period, little chorus girl meets big star, they fall in love and his attempts to groom her for stardom are nearly thwarted by his bird-brained but vicious co-star.

This stereo-typed plot is ornamented with a series of songs by Arthur Freed and Nacio Herb Brown, selected from films of the Thirties and later - most of which were standards in their time, although, had it not been for the film, would have been forgotten by now.

Betty Comden and Adolph Green, successful Broadway playwrights, scripted the film and they have adapted their film script for the stage. This is what BROS chose to delight us with last night.

And a delight it is, the staging of the numbers, which benefited, as do most Am Dram productions, from a large chorus captured the flavour of the early Film Musical perfectly.

In particular, I enjoyed *Beautiful Girl*, beautifully sung by Billy Conway, who could have substituted admirably for Dick Powell, or Nick Lucas, or, in fact, for practically any other tenor in a Busby Berkeley musical, and which was danced by a bevy of girls whose grace and talent equalled that of the chorines of the period.

The lead, Don Lockwood, was played by Bryan Cardus, who, although he resembled Gene Hackman rather than Gene Kelly, proved himself a more than adequate hoofer, and, in the two big numbers, the title song and *Broadway Rhythm* dispelled memories of the film sequences.

In fact, while the choreography of *Singin' in the Rain* approximated that of the, by now

hackneyed film version, he made it his own, with a zest and sense of humour which, to me, was more charming than Gene Kelly's over-professional expertise.

He also has a strong voice, which he used to great effect in both the love songs and the comedy numbers.

As Kathy Selden, the part that made a star of Debbie Reynolds, Hannah Rogers looked charming and danced well, but I thought her voice was tired, particularly during the second act in the scenes where she dubs the voice of Lina Lamont, Don's vindictive co-star.

Lina, herself, is a gift for any comedienne and Maria Waters grabbed it with both hands and squeezed every ounce of humour from the part.

She got, deservedly, an enthusiastic round of applause for her rendition of What's Wrong With Me, as she realises her world is crumbling about her.

Although Lina is a part it is very easy to exaggerate, with its Bronx accent and the gold-digger outlook on life, Ms Waters avoided the traps and made a very amusing, yet rounded, character out of her.

For purpose of plot, Don Lockwood has a humorous sidekick/friend, Cosmo Brown.

Originally sung and danced by Donald O'Connor, it is here played by Jeff Chinappen, who also makes the part his own, and while being very funny avoids the mugging which marred Donald O'Connor's performance.

While not so technically secure a dancer as O'Connor, he none the less dances very well and got well-deserved applause for his Be A Clown routine.

The rest of the characters are ciphers or caricatures, the head of the studio, the director, the radio announcer, the voice coaches, etc but Charles Halford, John Nugent, Lizzie Brignall, Denise Truscott and Edz Barrett all justified their moments in the limelight.

Edz Barrett, in particular, more than held his own in the song and dance Moses Supposes, with Bryan Cardus and Jeff Chinappen proving you don't have to be a principal to be a very creditable all-rounder.

And this, I think, sums up my feeling for all the cast members, they were bright, efficient and a strong supporting team, any of whom could have stepped into the lead in the traditional manner and become a star.

As I have already inferred, the choreography is an integral part of the piece and this was imaginatively staged by Sharon Baker, who succeeded in imparting the right period flavour to her dances and ensembles, without ever falling into the trap of Pastiche.

The same applies to the director, Rachel Moorhead, who kept the action tight and developed the humour and parody of the plot with consummate skill, which resulted in a production that could hold its own against any now playing in the West End.

The only thing that sounded a discordant note (if you will pardon the pun) was the orchestra,

under the direction of William Morris. They seemed under-rehearsed but, possibly, this will have been rectified during the course of the week.

This slight cavil apart, I must congratulate BROS on a very handsome and well-conceived production, and one I would gladly go and see again. I await their next one with eager anticipation.

Perhaps they could revive one of the old Stanley Lupino musicals from the Thirties. Bryan Cardus could assume his mantle with ease.

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