

East of England

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Betty Blue Eyes

Book by **RON COWEN & DANIEL LIPMAN**. Music by **GEORGE STILES**. Lyrics by **ANTHONY DREWE**.

Based on the **HANDMADE** film 'A PRIVATE FUNCTION'

society/company: **Shenfield Operatic Society** ([directory](#))

performance date: **07 Feb 2018**

venue: **Queen's Theatre Hornchurch**

reviewer/s: **Michael Gray** (Sardines review)



The mood of austerity Britain is set to be lifted by a Royal Wedding. Princess Lilibet is to wed her dashing young Prince. But this is 1947 – almost everything worth eating is strictly rationed, so where is Shepardsford to find the porcine piece de resistance for their celebratory Private Function. Enter Betty Blue Eyes, a clandestine fatted pig ...

This Stiles and Drewe musical uses a book by Americans Ron Cowen and Daniel Lipman, inspired by the Alan Bennett film of 1984.

Shenfield Operatic bring the whimsical tale to life in a charming production, packed with character turns and hummable tunes.

It opens with a big chorus number – good Yorkshire folk in celebratory mood, frocks and wigs evoking the 40s, against a townscape featuring a parade of shops, an enamel plug for Rowntree's Cocoa, and All Saints' Church prominent upstage.

Sarah Barton's production is fresh and inventive. Mild-mannered chiropodist – the excellent Alli Smith – dreams of queues of limping women entering his new premises, skipping out cured moments later. In "Magic Fingers", a poignant number blending comedy and tragedy, three ladies seductively roll down their nylons as they await a house visit. Each is scarred by the war, and ghosts of regret appear behind them. "Ill Wind" is wonderfully choreographed, with bed sheets on the line and hand gestures from Mrs Tilbrook [Gemma Lowley-Smith] and the Ladies. The fiendish "Pig No Pig" trio and the "Confessions" finale – worthy of Gilbert and Sullivan – are both handled with panache.

Outstanding among the many soloists, Joanna Hunt as Little Veronica, with Sarah Nuzum as her snooty mother, Rachel Watson's lovely Soprano as Princess Elizabeth, Kerry Cooke seductive as a McGill postcard on the butcher's block, Dave Cormack as Allardyce the accountant whose affection for his blue-eyed Betty saves her bacon, Kate Smith as the grotesque, voracious Mother Dear, and Iain Johnson as the Meat Inspector – a cartoon bogeyman with his toothbrush 'tache and his long leather trenchcoat. A memorable characterization, with a touch of Brecht and Weill, especially in "Upholding the Law". Incidentally, this month sees the opening of the first production of this musical in German: *Das Musical mit dem Schwein* – good luck with that, Linz.

Betty herself is a lovable puppet – the second time I've seen her since her Colchester Mercury début – handled for Shenfield by Caroline Green.

Her Majesty was not able to find room for Hornchurch in her diary, but her Lady in Waiting did send a very nice letter, prominently reproduced in the glossy programme.

Her disappointment, though, is as nothing compared with that of Rachel Lane, making her début with Shenfield in the leading role of Joyce, the chiropodist's ambitious wife. Suffering, as were several others, with a throat infection, she

was unable to continue on opening night. In a seamless transition – the stuff of showbiz legend, this – she was replaced, not by some shy chorine, but by director Sarah Barton, who gave a breath-takingly assured performance, especially in the big production numbers - "Nobody", with the showgirls, "Lionheart", in the Primrose Ballroom.

Rachael Plunkett is the Musical Director – vocally the ladies outshone the gentlemen, I felt – and she's on keys in the hidden pit band, under the baton of Stuart Woolner.

