

Bugsy Malone, Shenfield Operatic Society Queens Theatre, Hornchurch



Guest Reviewer: Michelle Jacobs

When one thinks of Alan Parker's classic gangster parody, 'Bugsy Malone' one thinks of child actors revelling in the slapstick elements as per the 1976 film and countless school productions since. Thus, the prospect of Shenfield Operatic Society delivering a performance played by 'grown-ups' was an intriguing one.

David Pridige, in a remarkably assured first-time directorial role, has obviously put a lot of thought into how to highlight the edgy, gritty themes on which the story is based while still retaining the feel-good musical comedy elements which are the essence of the show. Some fine performances from the well-cast lead actors help considerably here too. Sean Hynes shows a great stage presence as Fat Sam, epitomising the sleazy underbelly of 1920s New York. The sexual and professional jealousy is palpable between Helen Sinclair as Blousey Brown and Jess Pether as a particularly alluring and glamorous Tallulah. Bugsy Malone himself is played with a suitably quiet suaveness and sophistication by Josh Handley, traits which a child might find difficult to convey, although there were times when Bugsy's presence was almost too subtle. Kerry Cooke pretty much steals the show as a vampy and merciless Dandy Dan. The decision to make her the leader of an all-female gang, kitted out in striking red and black, is surprising but gives an interesting extra dimension to the saga of the two warring gangs.

Well thought out scenery and props, including classic cars and a frightened dog, play their part in evoking the streets of prohibition era New York and the interior of Fat Sam's 'Speak Easy' complete with well-stocked bar and name up in lights. The musicians, too, have to be credited for their impeccable interpretation of the bluesy, jazzy soundtrack, although at some points it meant the one or two of the actors struggled to be heard. Lighting is also often used inventively to arresting effect.

While the 'grown-ups' certainly bring an engaging edge to this production, they also turn their hands to some mean, old-fashioned musical entertainment, bringing alive the classic song and dance routines. The boxing sequence is a particular feat of ensemble choreography as are the 'down and outs' on the dockside. The Chorus Dancers obviously revel in their energetic Charleston numbers, complete with appropriately glittery 'flapper' dresses while the heavies of Fat Sam's gang also get a chance to show they are remarkably light on their feet. Kerry Cooke, Sean Hynes and Jess Pether also display particularly strong singing voices.

It is clear that all the speaking cast have worked hard on perfecting authentic New York accents which most manage to hold throughout. The occasional slip is not overtly noticeable, however, as the overall impression of the production is so immersive.

It was a brave move to try and put an adult spin on a show that is so synonymous with child-like humour and energy. With one shot of white goo from a menacingly silent splurge gun, it would appear that Shenfield Operatic Society have just about pulled it off.

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