

*National Operatic & Dramatic
Association*

South West Amateur Theatre Magazine

"A First-rate Opportunity"

AUTUMN 2009

MALCOLM WHITE reports on District 15 (Gloucester)

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SNOW WHITE and the SEVEN DWARFS, Thornbury Musical Theatre Group

Director: Dorothy Wrench Choreographer: Julia Edwards Musical Director: Roger Winter

It is good to see a pantomime so well supported, as the youngsters attending are the theatregoers of the future. The performance I went to was practically a sell out, demonstrating that the strange, very British, tradition of pantomime is still alive and kicking. This particular offering by Alan Frayn did not stray far from the original story, which for children is a good thing. It had all the ingredients of a traditional pantomime, in my mind the right thing to have. The costumes, as always with this group, were vibrant in colour and complemented the sets and lighting well. The Dame's were particular loud and over the top, which is how it should be. The sets utilised the limited stage space well, and the diamond mine was particularly delightful. The choice of songs were, at times, a bit dated and a couple of them bordering on obscure. Audiences do like familiarity when it comes to the music in a panto, particularly the youngsters. Julia Edwards' choreography was simple and polished, and the four piece band created a pleasing sound together. There were some lovely performances including Janet Frost, who made a charming Prince Ferdinand; and Julia Taylor as the gentle and kind Snow White. The harmony in their duets was lovely as their voices matched each other well. Steve Young made a real impression as Chuckles, and David Wrench was outrageous as the Dame. Even though I felt that the pace and comedy between them was laboured in parts, I did think they worked well together as a team. This was a long production, which was reflected in the restlessness of the younger members of the audience, but the enthusiasm and the energy of the cast was evident throughout.

FIDDLER ON THE ROOF, North Avon Youth Theatre Company, Armstrong Hall, Thornbury, April

Director: Lin Bedford Choreographers: Kelly Barton & Danielle Shadbolt Musical Director: Arne Kovac

What a brave decision to make, to have a youth group perform a show in which most of the characters

are the elders of a Jewish community. How would they be able to portray the maturity and the physical ages of the piece convincingly? They did not only rely on the extremely good makeup, they worked on their whole stance and persona. This talented group took on the challenge of the beautiful, but difficult, score and more than rose to it. The stirring opening number, 'Tradition', was delivered with enthusiasm, confidence and clarity. This is probably the hardest piece. The costumes were well put together, although I'm not sure that the dirt track roads would have resulted in such clean, shiny shoes. The set was well planned and the many scene changes executed smoothly. The lighting design was sympathetic to the mood of the moment. James McGraw-Allen gave a strong, but sensitive performance as Tevye, and was well matched by Naomi Dunn's Golde. Lesley-Ann Ainsworth (Tzeitel), Susanna Hudson (Hodle) and Jade Mitchell-Smith (Chava) were convincing as the lovelorn daughters, and Bay Dimond was superb as the gossiping matchmaker, Yente. The choreography was simple and polished and the eleven piece orchestra, under the skilful direction of Arne Kovac, made the most of the fabulous score. All in all, this was a very enjoyable production and hats off to all concerned.

DEAD GUILTY, St. John's Players, St. John's Hall, March

Director: Joe Hackett

When Richard Harris created the characters for Dead Guilty he appeared to do so in such a way that all were thoroughly dislikeable and therefore difficult to emphasise with. In spite of the shortcomings of the script itself Nikki White gave a great lead performance as Julia Darrow. She maintained her strong character throughout with good clear diction and the physicality of her performance as the recovering accident victim, with all the frustration of immobility, was intense and sustained. Pat Manifold gave solid support as Margaret the revenge seeking widow of Julia's lover. The sheer volume of scene changes implied, perhaps, that it had been written for television or radio and the backstage team are to be congratulated on presenting a well constructed set that was pleasing to the eye and easy for the actors to work in. The lighting was well planned, the half lit window was particularly good as was the shadow at the top of the stairs. The voice over scenes also worked well. The musical choices were well chosen and at times very poignant. Was Dead Guilty a thriller? Well, Alfred Hitchcock once wrote, 'what frightens is not a 'bang' itself but the inexorable lead-up to it' and unfortunately, in spite of St John's obvious talents, the long expected reveal in this play was for me somewhat of a 'pop'. I was hoping for a twist in the tale but in the end was left sadly satisfied.

ACT YOUR AGE, Manor Players of Tewkesbury, George Watson Hall, 25th April

Director: Malcolm White Choreographer: Val Lockley Musical Director: Paul Hardy

A new show. How lovely! This one, the brainchild of Christopher Wortley, first made its presence known to us at Bicton 2007, when Chris produced extracts on a monitor as part of that year's exhibits. A Manor Players member was hooked and the rest, is history...

Set in a therapy clinic for celebrities, down on its luck, they are forced to take in a bunch of old folk, whose own Home has suddenly become uninhabitable. A mystery "celebrity" books in, wishing to remain incognito and from thereon, chaos rules as farce takes over. The expert cast disguised themselves successfully, moving easily from one character and one age to another, as the old folk administered their own peculiar therapies. Without skilful direction, offence could be taken but fortunately expert casting and acting ensured we laughed with them, not at them. A good-sounding combo of pianos and percussion effectively accompanied the rhythmic, rather than melodic melodies, with the possible exception of the catchy "I want to be a Celebrity" and a great Rap number. These same rhythmic patterns segued into synchronised movement, effectively executed by the large cast. Acting honours must be awarded to Kim Gough as Valerie, owner of the clinic and her real life sister, one-time Regional Rep Lin

Willerton as cleaner Pat – a wonderfully played and sung comedic performance. Space prevents me from mentioning more but I certainly awarded verbal bouquets after the performance. Bravo Manor Players for having the courage to try something new, which was enjoyed by audience and cast alike.

HELLO, DOLLY!, Dursley Operatic & Dramatic Society, Lister Hall, Dursley, May

Director: Emma Hitchings Choreographer: Val Lockley Musical Director: Roger Winter

Malcolm White reports:-

I remember the first time I saw 'Hello Dolly!'. It was the film version starring Barbara Streisand and I was immediately hooked on the fabulous score. Each number is a hit in itself, and hearing them is like listening to an old friend. This production was an excellent evening's entertainment, and certainly did the show justice. Emma Hitchings can be extremely happy with her debut as a director. She managed to put her own individual mark on an old favourite and create some special moments. Her attention to detail was admirable and she utilised her talented cast to its full potential. The nine piece band was confidently led. It was delightfully balanced and had a wonderful sound, which didn't drown the performers. Val Lockley's imaginative choreography created some lovely pictures and was designed to match the abilities of the dancers. There were some great performances from the principals. Julia Whitman gave a very confident portrayal in the title role. I did feel that her singing voice was a little soft for the style of the score, but she more than made up for it in charisma and strength of performance. Craig Hewlett as Horace Vandergelder was superb. He managed to demonstrate the arrogance of the man, whilst still allowing some vulnerability to show through. Lizzie Lindsell (Irene Malloy) gave a mature characterisation and was beautifully matched by Pippa Robinson as Minnie Fay. Charlie Marshall's Barnaby was a joy to watch, too. This actor has marvellous facial expression. As always with DODS, the set was ingeniously designed, and the changes executed smoothly. Congratulations to all involved with this production, it certainly had 'elegance'!

ACT YOUR AGE, Manor Players of Tewkesbury, George Watson Memorial Hall, April

Director: Malcolm White Choreographer: Val Lockley Musical Director: Paul Hardy

This was the Manor Player's 40th Anniversary production and the South West's premiere of 'Act Your Age' by Christopher Wortley. It's very brave in the current climate for any society to step to the far left of box office and to try something relatively new and I congratulate them on this endeavour. 'Act Your Age' is described as a 'musical farce' and the writing had created many challenges for the troupe. The overture was reminiscent of a Blackpool Wurlitzer rendition with a busy line of suitably 'saucy seaside postcard' actors entering for the ensuing farce. Manor Players are a talented Society with strength in depth and it was evident that the cast relished this show. Their infectious enjoyment carried to the audience but unfamiliar music is often hard to learn and many of the melodies within this show were very forgettable. The overcomplicated lyrics and high farce whilst singing demanded in the script also meant that plotline went missing. That said, 'Sunny Seniors' was a very enjoyable ensemble number. The set was simple, well designed and solid! Great doors! It was suitably shabby for the storyline and dressed in such a way as to maximise the limited acting area that such a large cast creates. The lighting was straightforward and there was a lovely end to the show with Pat's paparazzi fest glittering onto the darkened backdrop of flashing cameras. Malcolm White is to be congratulated on directing such a large group within limited space. He created some lovely pictures with his cast and there were some genuinely funny moments.

HOT MIKADO, Sodbury Vale Musical Comedy Club, Town Hall, Chipping Sodbury, May

Director: Michaela Crumpton Choreographer: Wendy Weaver Musical Director: Ewan Hackett

As the tight six-piece band led by Ewan Hackett cracked out the overture with slick gusto the audience buzzed with anticipation – we were in for a treat. The costumed band was on stage as part of the action, complete with lines and asides so reminiscent of professional productions of “*Chicago*”. The young vibrant cast, obviously loving every minute of their performance, poured onto the stage from each entrance and made light work of this musical’s difficult numbers. Their enthusiasm was infectious. Alex Weaver (Nanki-Poo) was a 16 year old who had learned the part in 24 hours and gave a great performance maintaining his American accent throughout and acting, singing and dancing as if he’d been rehearsing for months. Other notable individual performances came from Ali Gurney (Pitti- Sing) and Amy Neal (Katisha) both of whom had great character and superb singing voices. Michaela Crumpton’s directing was a delight and this, combined with the frenetic and imaginative choreography of Wendy Weaver, meant that the show did not falter. The Finale of Act One was absolutely scintillating and the interval normally so welcome became a necessary evil. The box set was very well laid out and cleverly lit with the scenes moving around effortlessly. The costumes were delicious – Ko-Ko and the other gentlemen’s rainbow of zoot suits were classy and complementary. The puppet used in Tit Willow had the audience in fits of laughter and goes to prove how timeless the humour of G & S can be. This was truly a *HOT* Mikado. A lovely, lovely show.

CALAMITY JANE, Cirencester Operatic Society, The Barn Theatre, May

Director: Jan Honeywill Choreographer: Rachel Wright Musical Director: Malcolm Webb

Calamity Jane is a rip roaring musical that demands much of its cast in the way of energy, attack and pace and the chorus need to be larger than life characters to paint out the scenes for the audience. Malcolm Webb’s excellent orchestra got things off to great start producing a very polished and professional overture against an innovative projection of the Deadwood Stage being chased by Indians followed by a set of images including ‘Deadwood circa 1876’. The opening set was very colourful and ‘Deadwood Stage’ produced some nice choral pictures with accompanying choreography that was very Western in style. Rachel Wright (Calamity) gave a good solid performance as did Elizabeth Gravestock (Katy Brown) whose delivery lifted the pace – ‘Women’s Touch’ was a lovely number with a great accompanying set. Chris Cleal (Francis Fryer) also did well demonstrating some nifty footwork in his range of talents. For me the Chorus members should be an extra principal and at times their energy levels faded. Although they sang well, occasionally there seemed a lack of projection and volume. The difference in the styles of the choreographers involved was visible and I did enjoy ‘Keep It Under Your Hat’ and the ‘Can Can’ which was very well executed by the three girls involved. Under the direction of Jan Honeywill this was a well co-ordinated production with thoughtfully designed sets and costumes that reflected the era and location and despite a very slow set change in Act Two the show ended well.

CAROUSEL, Cotswold Players, The Cotswold Playhouse, April

Director: Patrick Howell Choreographer: Laura Clifford Musical Director: Rob Kempner

“Carousel” was once described as ‘the best musical of the twentieth century’ and the score demands a high level of singing ability and musical support. I, therefore, really felt for Richard Murray (Billy) who was ill and had lost his voice. The cast covered well, showing versatility and teamwork and being a real trouper he was able to use what he had left. The shining star for me was Sarah Kilminster (Julie) who, at just eighteen years old, was a genuinely believable leading lady showing a great range of full ‘no holds barred’ emotion combined with a beautiful singing voice. Tony Young’s (Enoch) was a delightful characterisation which drew the eye. Other supporting performances by minor principals in the seasoned chorus added to the overall polish - my favourite being Geoff Butterworth who doubled as the Star

Keeper and Doctor Seldon. The choreography was simple and effective - the Ballet Pas De Deux a highlight with young Hattie Lea (Louise) executing her routine superbly. The backstage team had worked wonders and we were treated to a fully functioning Carousel with actors seated on horses. Although backdrops were plain - suitable lighting and the dressings of well constructed stage furniture took us from scene to scene. Patrick Howell's clever directing enabled the cast to fill the stage in an animated and attractive way that was most pleasing to the eye and the music complimented and did not overpower. The wonderful acoustics at the Cotswold Playhouse meant that no microphones were needed and not a word was missed.

THE GONDOLIERS, Cotswold Savoyards, Everyman Theatre, Cheltenham, June

Director/Choreographer: Gill Cogzell Musical Director: Peter Meason

This production had a very traditional appearance, from the colourful costumes and backdrops, to the large accompanying orchestra and a cast singing without any man-made amplification. Gill Cogzell had not only directed, but had also choreographed the performance. Her kaleidoscopic choreography enabled the large ensemble to move attractively within the limited width of the Everyman stage and the cast adapted very well to the dances with only the odd look down to the feet from the less confident. The choral singing was very disciplined but occasionally just overpowered by the orchestra but this did not detract from my overall enjoyment. The Principals were delightfully tongue-in-cheek grotesques. Simon Moss (Duke) commanded the stage giving a very comical and assured performance which was well met by his wife Roz Edwards (Duchess) and their haughty daughter Caroline Price (Casilda) who had a charming soprano voice and maintained her character throughout. Keith Swinford (the salacious Don Alhambra) was confident with clear diction and a polished and professional singing style and Emma Ponfield (Gianetta) also sang well and drew the eye. The lighting was well designed and sympathetic to the sets and costumes all of which had been well thought out. However, because of the overall period appearance of this production, I was disappointed with some of the hairstyles and footwear. The cast appeared to be having great fun which is essential in operetta and to quote from one of The Gondoliers first reviews 'The reception of the opera was uproariously cordial'.

GODSPELL, Thornbury Musical Theatre Group, Armstrong Hall, June

*Director: Karen Blount Choreographers: Kara Kennedy with Natalie Britton & Gary Kennedy
Musical Director: Roger Winter*

Stephen Schwartz's superb music and lyrics and the improvisational nature of the storytelling in *Godspell* allows a freedom of interpretation for both cast and director. For this show to succeed the cast needs to be uninhibited and confident in their voice and movement. As always, Thornbury MTG were in fine voice and Karen Blount's directorial debut produced some lovely pictures with clever stage movement from her large cast. The choreography in some of the larger numbers was excellent and the enjoyment of the performers obvious. It was lovely to see so many actors who would not necessarily be cast in leading roles being given the opportunity to cut their teeth. The enthusiasm of the chorus was at times a little undisciplined which meant that some principals' lines were drowned out and plotline lost. *Godspell* is an ensemble show but Jesus is the pivotal role. Mark Collins is an experienced performer and has an excellent singing voice, but in this role he appeared to lack confidence in his acting and movement. There were strong performances from other principals who delivered their songs with gusto – David Walker was a convincing Judas and I especially enjoyed Jo Gayther's 'Turn back, oh man' and Gary Kennedy's 'We Beseech Thee'. The lighting was excellent and made the simple set very pleasing to the eye. The large number of microphones made balancing a little difficult for the technicians. The crucifixion of Jesus and the build up to it was very powerful and well acted by all.

HONK!, Shooting Stars Youth Theatre Company, Town Hall, Chipping Sodbury, July

Directors/Choreographers: Alison Gurney & Katy West Musical Director: Amy Wilkins

'Honk!' is based on the Hans Christian Anderson story of the Ugly Duckling and was a winner of the Olivier Award for best new musical in the same year that Mamma Mia premiered. It presents quite a challenge to any amateur company with its very difficult musical score. Directed and choreographed by Katy West, who was once herself a young performer in this group and Alison Gurney, 'Honk!' was an opportunity for many of the fledgling members to take centre stage as more established performers had grown and fled the nest. Stephanie Edwards (Ida) gave a very mature performance as the mother of the brood who finds herself with a young chick who definitely doesn't fit in. Jacob Warn (Ugly) had an excellent singing voice and played the geeky young signet to perfection. Other notable performances included the slinky Sarah Jones (Cat) who pursued her intended meal throughout the show with evil relish and the pompous William Butters (Greylag) the geese's Squadron Leader. 'Play with Your Food' the hilarious cat's song and 'The Wild Goose Chase' were musical highlights. There was evident enjoyment from the whole cast in this colourful musical and it was infectious. 'Honk!' seems ideally suited for young actors, dealing with issues of non-conformity and bullying and going to prove that those who may not necessarily fit the social norm may have a swan inside them bursting to get out and spread their wings.

CAROUSEL, Promenade Productions, The Bacon Theatre, July

Director: John Pannett Choreographer: Heather. M. Newman Musical Director: David Manifold

What a great musical choice for the 25th Anniversary of Promenade Productions! This was a wonderfully atmospheric show. The audience were treated to a very full fairground with large carousel and some stunning backdrops that were complemented by a large cast of both young and more evergreen performers in fine period costume with plenty of attention to detail. It was Opening Night and there were a few squeaks from some of the orchestra during the overture - some of the music was played a little slower than I would have expected and at times the cast were noticeably waiting to be cued by David Manifold which meant pace dropped. Tim Jones (Billy) showed great potential whilst making his debut in such a large leading role. He acted and sang with confidence taking the audience with him and causing the use of many a hanky at the end. Sarah Aston (Carrie) was a delightful character whilst Kate Aston's (Nettie's) superb singing made 'You'll never walk alone' and 'June is Bustin' out all over' musical highlights of the show. It was a shame that the gun malfunctioned at such a critically emotional moment but the cast did well to recover. Heather Newman's choreography was excellent throughout but the 'Beach Ballet' was outstanding - Isabel Powell (Louise) not only danced with style and grace but she also acted her part with such maturity that it truly enhanced her scenes with Billy Bigelow. The clever bows with the use of the heavenly light made sure that the atmosphere of this lovely production was maintained until the final curtain.

**THOROUGHLY MODERN MILLIE, Cheltenham Operatic & Dramatic Society,
The Everyman Theatre, June**

Director: Daphne Herbert Choreographer: Claire Yeates Musical Director: David Whittle

This version sends up the 1967 film rather than reproducing it and Daphne Herbert's direction allowed her actors' own interpretations to emerge whilst guiding them through the story. Millie was played by Pippa Thomas, a confident young actress whose voice seems made for musical theatre. Pippa danced well and held her accent although just occasionally she threw away the odd line with casual delivery.

Leo Roberts (Jimmy) was energetic and likeable and Vicki Riches (Dorothy) had lovely comic timing and a crystal voice. Charlie Corn (Trevor Graydon) was superb as the rakish, matinée-idol man-about-town. Dan Bacon (Bun Foo)and Jamie Dewick (Ching Ho) showed great teamwork and a special mention must go to the very talented Lynsey MacDonald (Miss Flannery). Claire Yeate's choreography was imaginatively constructed within the limited width of the theatre. The female chorus members were visibly more accomplished in their dancing than the males but the musical numbers were well executed. 'Thoroughly Modern Millie' and 'Forget About The Boy' were highlights. David Whittle's orchestra played well but was often too loud. Unfortunately this meant that words in songs were missed and speaking lines were 'over' rather than 'under' played. 'Millie' is a very long show and is not helped by slow entrances and an inveterate lack of pace (mainly in chorus scenes - although those involving Mrs Mears were particularly laboured) and at times the silences this created were palpable. Costumes and sets had combined to create visually striking and colourful imagery throughout and overall this was a very pleasant if somewhat lengthy production.

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