

2017 - 2018

**“Dirty Rotten Scoundrels” presented by St Austell Amateur Operatic Society
Seen by Carol Taylor and Sally Robinson 13 April 2018**

THE SHOW

This musical show, based on a 1988 non-musical film, was first staged on Broadway in 2005 and seen on a London stage for the first time in 2014. It is a very lively story of two con-men at work on the French Riviera, entrapping wealthy females. Their attempt to work together creates lots of amusing pitfalls, and eventually they themselves get conned by a newcomer, “the Jackal”. The success of the show depends entirely on the relationship between the two men who must complement each other as a classic comedy duo. A witty script and cleverly written songs provide a hugely entertaining show with much coming and going from one scene to another. We are taken into a world of glamour, but the thread of self-mockery running through stops the show from descending into kitsch. It is a challenge to achieve a fast-moving presentation in a live theatre production.

PRESENTATION

Sets: the set management for this show was a triumph. Many short scenes took place, needing rapid changes of background, and this was achieved by splendid moving flats creating the hotel foyer, a bedroom, Lawrence’s villa, Ruprecht’s ‘prison’, a good substantial railway carriage, a balcony, a station and an airport. Free-standing central flats parted to reveal the elegant centre staircase leading to a mezzanine floor which extended right across the whole stage. Huge windows provided the backdrop, sometimes with twinkling stars. The curved side flats were moved swiftly to create a different scene, and although it did have a bit of a wobble, the bedroom scene was very convincing. There was a lovely art deco feel to the whole show, starting with the clever but simple strip-lighting design of the stage before the show started.

Lighting and Sound: the lighting for this show was excellent and the stage was fully and brightly lit when required. Effective use of blue/red/dimmers to cover scene changes and spotlights were used with great skill. On one or two occasions we lost the light on faces and there were moments when the lights came up only just on time for the start of a song or conversation, but there were so many lighting cues we can forgive the odd mistake. As mentioned above, the strip lighting was lovely.

There was an 11-piece band which provided a strong backing to the show. It was a good rounded sound and was always spot on for the timing of musical numbers and for pauses in dialogue/action and mid-song moments. The volume of sound seemed very high when the show started which needed a rather uncomfortable increase in volume given to the personal mics of the singers, but this seemed to be better judged in Act II.

Generally the technical control of the personal mics was good though Lawrence seemed to have some physical difficulty with his mic. However, we did miss a lot of the lyrics in the songs, also some of the dialogue which had underscoring, through a rather heavy orchestral backing.

Sound effects were good – the gunshots, police siren and car arrival were on time, but the roulette SFX was slightly late both times.

Costume: we saw a lovely array of costumes throughout the show. Colourful evening dresses and saucy French maid outfits looked terrific. The bell hop was very smart with his pill-box hat, and the contrasting “Oklahoma” costumes for chorus and for Jolene were delightful. The nuns and gospel choir looked exactly right.

Lawrence looked smooth and sophisticated in his white DJ, and his Dr Shuffhausen outfit, topped with a jaunty feathered hat was very funny. Freddie had a number of excellent costumes for his various activities; it was a pity we could see the outline of protective padding underneath his trousers during the whipping scene. Christine wore nice innocent-looking dresses until the end, and Muriel always looked wealthy. The girls/ladies were all dressed in appropriately luxurious outfits, and we loved the skintight garments of the girl tourists who crossed the stage at the Airport.

The white bathrobes for Andre and Muriel were very appropriate for this scene, and the conductress looked very seductive in her uniform.

Makeup: this was always unobtrusive and suitable for the relationship of the actors to the audience. Maybe the principal ladies could have worn a brighter red lipstick.

Props: we saw a wonderful selection of props, and we appreciated the great attention to detail. A pretty chaise longue and carved white table and chair presented a believable villa, and we loved the palm tree with lights for outdoor effect. Using traditional deckchairs for the final scene was a nice touch. All the drinks including the champagne bucket were accurate. The cheval mirror was convincing and the occasional moon was very funny. The roulette table and Freddie’s wheelchair worked beautifully, and the small props – musical box, briefcase and cash tin - were all correct. The wads of paper money looked very good, but Muriel’s suitcase was not Louis Vuitton !

STAGE DIRECTION

This show moved along at a cracking pace and the many scene changes were achieved with great skill. Good lighting and slick movements of the flats by the stage crew made changes almost invisible.

There was terrific energy throughout and the overall effect was glamorous and professional. The crowd scenes worked especially well, giving us the hustle and bustle of a busy hotel. Members of the chorus were in character at all times, whether they were guests, maids, tourists, cowboys, and they were always well rehearsed even when passing quietly behind the dialogue of the principals.

The principals themselves were all first-class performers: well done with the varied accents and the balance achieved between the two very different leading men. The relationship between Andre and Muriel was charming, and the on-going confusion between Lawrence and Freddie was very well depicted.

Exits and entrances were always smooth and unhurried.

The staircase and upper level were well used in the big scenes, and intimate scenes were nicely presented without being too constricted.

Dialogue was well projected on the whole with a good variety of pace and tone, but there were times when we lost words because of the musical backing.

All the many comic moments in the story were beautifully delivered with clarity and first-class timing, ensuring that the storyline was clear for the audience from start to finish.

MUSICAL DIRECTION

The 11-piece band provided a splendid full sound to accompany the show and carried it along with energy and pace. Sometimes the accompaniment was a bit too loud for us to hear the lyrics of the musical numbers, especially at the start when the voices and instruments were at a very high volume. This was a complex musical score with its mix of parody (Oklahoma), Cole Porter-style love songs, and even French chansons. It needed competent performers to pull off the harmonies and key changes, and on the whole this was very well achieved. Ensemble groups accompanied the soloists very well. The chorus performed with energy and style: "Give them what they want", "Oklahoma" led energetically by Jolene, "Ruffhousin" and the Hotel Yodel" were all terrific. "Hallelujah" from the nuns was hilarious and "Love is in my Legs" was another very good number.

The solo numbers were also very well delivered especially "What was a woman to do", "Chimp in a Suit", "Great Big Stuff", "Here I am", and "Love Sneaks in" performed in a Professor Higgins style. "All about Ruprecht" was very amusing. We heard lovely duets from Andre and Muriel in "Like Zis, Like Zat", Lawrence and Christine in "Love is my Legs", also "Nothing is too Wonderful" from Freddie and Christine.

DANCE DIRECTION

We saw some lovely set pieces in this show. The line dancing routine in "Oklahoma" was excellent and we loved the French maids (and man) routines. The choreography for "Hotel Yodel" and "The More we Dance" tango was slick and polished and a pleasure to watch. There were no weak links in your dancers, and the modified moves - geared for the solo singers to join in - worked very well. We saw some nice movement accompanying a number of the solos and duets. The many hours of rehearsal certainly paid off. Freddie's moves for "Great Big Stuff" were outrageous and very funny indeed.

INDIVIDUAL PERFORMANCES

LAWRENCE JAMESON: A smooth confident performance from this experienced actor. He was a convincing slick con-man, and his moment of weakness in "Love Sneaks In" was well judged and very touching. He maintained his cod Austrian accent and his 'half singing' in the songs really fitted the character. His collaboration with Freddie worked well on all levels.

FREDDY BENSON: we saw terrific pace and attack from this clever actor. His energy was boundless, dipping only very slightly at the end. "Great Big Stuff" was a triumph (both times), his comic timing and singing were excellent – we loved his bun-eating with Christine, his mad performance as Ruprecht, and his suppressed pain with Dr. Shuffhausen. He maintained a convincing American accent throughout, and we enjoyed the contrast in his delivery when he portrayed moments of self doubt. An excellent foil for the urbane Lawrence.

ANDRE THIBAUT: we enjoyed this performance very much. He delivered an excellent understated French accent and all his laugh lines were perfectly timed and delivered. He was a believable, elegant Frenchman, and we enjoyed his off/on romance with Muriel. Lovely duet "Like Zis like Zat" with moments of true pathos, and "Chimp in a Suit" was good. We

could hear most of his dialogue, but a rather stronger vocal projection might have been encouraged.

CHRISTINE COLGATE: showing us very pretty open face, this actress was the epitome of innocent goodness. She possesses an excellent singing voice and did justice to her songs – the upbeat “Here I am” and the tuneful sincerity of “Nothing is too Wonderful to be Tue”. She moved with confidence, revealing a strong stage presence, and we enjoyed her romantic scenes with both men. We would have appreciated a little more hardening of tone and attitude at the end when she becomes “the Jackal”.

MURIEL EUBANKS: this actress maintained an excellent American accent throughout; she has a beautiful strong voice and very expressive face. A really well-rounded portrayal of a middle-aged woman looking for true love. She showed us the slightly loud pushy American, softening when the possibility of love with Andre came into her life. Good stage presence and projection. Her singing was first-class.

JOLENE OAKES: here we saw a brash young Oklahoman hell-bent on getting what she wanted. Her “Oklahoma” song was loud and pacy, as was the delivery of her dialogue, and her scene with Ruprecht was very funny. This was an excellent comic performance.

L’ENSEMBLE: the backbone of the show from the gravel voiced receptionist – a brilliantly-performed cameo role - to the delightfully camp bellboy. All played their parts with energy and enthusiasm, always convincing in which ever character they were expected to play. They were a very well rehearsed team.

ENDEAVOUR, ORIGINALITY AND ATTAINMENT

You gave us an uplifting old-style musical comedy which ticked all the boxes as far as the large audience was concerned. Spirits were lifted by the lively music, the great vitality of all the performers, a very entertaining story delivered with brilliant comic awareness, and the colour and sparkle of a thoroughly successful entertainment. What a blast ! What a ball !

Thank you, St Austell AOS for inviting the CDA to your production. As you can tell, we enjoyed our evening with you very much and wish you well with plans for your next show. If you would like an electronic copy of this report please contact me at sally.robinson13@btinternet.com, possibly with instructions as to where to send it.