

DIRTY ROTTEN SCOUNDRELS

St. Austell Amateur Operatic Society

Director: Kathy West**Musical Director: Vicky Pascoe****Choreographer: Jess Madeley**As seen by Oriel Bennett on Wednesday 11th April 2018

at The Keay Theatre, St. Austell

Any observation made by the reviewer can only be based on what she sees at the performance in question. The reviewer may have received information in advance of the performance and it is inevitable that her assessment will be affected by that knowledge. The N.O.D.A. Representative's intention is to give an objective critique of the overall production and in particular the performance viewed. It should be remembered that any review of this nature can only be objective as far as the techniques used during the performance observed. Any criticisms expressed may not have been valid at other performances, and are only made to encourage higher standards in Amateur Theatre. It is hoped that the audience's appreciation of your efforts will have given everyone a lift and encouraged you to greater achievements in the future and that the observations made by the reviewer will prove helpful in improving future productions. This is only one person's opinion and is not an adjudication.

Although I have been, for many years, entertained by the 1988 film of *Dirty Rotten Scoundrels*, I didn't know about its origins in a film of 24 years earlier, *Bedtime Story* starring Marlon Brando and David Niven. The ingenious twist added at the end of the later film strikes me as a huge improvement to the story and of course it is this wonderful comedy with Steve Martin and Michael Caine that was adapted into a stage musical by Jeffrey Lane in 2004 with a score by David Yazbek. It is refreshing to see a new show on the amateur circuit and I wonder whether it is a freedom or a challenge for a company to try something likely to be unfamiliar to its audience, as a change from the oh-so-frequent *My Fair Ladys* and *South Pacifics* that have been seen umpteen times. There are no pre-conceptions so a director can allow the imagination free rein and the cast can create their own characters. A drawback might be that the songs, being unknown, do not have the essence to remain in the brain and indeed, even with the programme's list of numbers to remind me, I cannot now think of a single melody!! So the staging becomes all-important – and that does last in the memory.

Staging starts with the set and once again Andy Martin Production Services have done you proud with a backdrop both attractive to look at and imaginatively economical with its requirements. Gloriously Art Deco and lit in rich violets and blues to start with, we could believe ourselves on the French Riviera in Beaumont-sur-Mer and its environs. Small revolves stage right and stage left turned to frame the different settings, accommodating with slight changes a hotel reception desk and a bedroom, and the centre-stage staircase was manoeuvred to become a hotel balcony with minimal effort. We saw the addition of trucks to bring in an instantly recognisable railway carriage, and a padded hotel foyer seat, plus a few pieces of furniture – table/desk and chair, and chaise longue – and for the most part these changes were choreographed to be effected by cast members. There were a couple of technical glitches on the night of my visit, which no doubt had the director, cast and crew cursing, but these things happen! The stage left revolve failed to turn fully and mid-stage runners hampered the smooth delivery of the trucks at one point but the cast nobly kept going. Sometimes is it better for a cast member to simply acknowledge the hitch and put it right? Otherwise the audience hangs on tenterhooks and, sadly, it can be a distraction.

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The lighting in a musical can be used to full effect with spectacular changes of colour to enhance both the set and the atmosphere of a scene – and this production had the luxury of a lighting design created by the set designer. We had a visual treat, with multicolour washes, a starcloth and some effective practical on stage lamps! There was just one oops moment when the train guard said one of her few precious lines in the dark. Many of the cast members wore microphones. Though necessary to lift the voices to audible level in a large theatre and with music playing, they do provide a technical element that is susceptible to gremlins, and so it proved to be. I was relieved, in a way, to learn that the leading man's lack of volume in the opening was because a mic pack had packed up! In this musical much of the story is relayed within the lyrics and it was unfortunate that we couldn't hear them clearly; particularly so, I expect, if the story was unknown. Diction and volume are crucial to help the audience gain maximum enjoyment and I did feel that it wasn't always punched enough, with the ends of lines fading away, although the US accent was maintained convincingly and in the singing too. There were several sound effects to keep the team busy including the roulette wheel, gunshots and a motorcar. The accordion could have been an effect but perhaps it was synthesized by a keyboard in the orchestra – I couldn't tell!

The list of props included (and you'll know what I've missed) newspapers, briefcase, suitcases, shopping, drinks trays, hankies that appeared in a timely fashion in a dance routine, a wheeled cheval mirror, the above-mentioned accordion and bowls of fruit, and – a sausage roll?! In general these were handled confidently and naturally as they should be; the first suitcase to be lifted by the bell boy seemed to have sufficient weight for its size – but subsequent cases appeared to be thrown around a little too effortlessly and was I alone in remarking that the Louis Vuitton suitcases weren't?

Costumes were plentiful and colourful, and required rapid changes for the ensemble players who became waitresses, hotel guests, French maids, cowboys and more, all with neat and tidy entrances that must have kept the backstage team of dressers on their toes. The immaculately well-timed dressing of Freddy on stage was impressive, and his subsequent hilarious change into the juvenile Ruprecht and that into the uniformed war veteran provided a contrast in character with the far smarter Lawrence. The ladies were appropriately dressed in well fitting outfits.

All these departments were ably coordinated by an experienced director who knows her craft and her cast, and has, once again, delivered a show that has all-round entertainment value. The smooth changes from one scene into the next displayed careful planning and choreography as did the natural movements of the company around the stage as they portrayed the different characters required of them. I was, however, distracted by the abundance of movement during the set up of the bet between Lawrence and Freddy, missing the dialogue completely as I watched waitresses carrying trays back and forth, and guests frantically coming and going with rather too much eye-catching energy (don't often say that!). There are times of critical import when less is more. It was only because I know the story that I was able to fill in what had happened. The various guises of the two leads were explored and personified with Freddy displaying both a grotesque Ruprecht and the pathos of a paralysed officer, and with Lawrence's panic at the thought of marriage to Jolene contrasting with the enjoyable sadism evident as he adopted the character of Dr. Shuffhausen. The company dance numbers were energetic and within the abilities of an amateur cast – but was it right to allow your young man to be quite so over-the-top as to steal the limelight? There's a fine balance to be drawn in harnessing his enthusiastic talent and steering it to appropriate use, and letting him get away with murder – entertaining though it is!! There was the opportunity for different dance styles to be brought into the show with the lively line-dancing "yeeha" of Jolene's number and the comic *schuhplattler* clapping used in Act II's opening scene, although I'm not sure about the inclusion of the contemporary dance stag leaps into a modern musical comedy... But I noticed and enjoyed seeing the nod to Physical Theatre (which is becoming your trademark!). I'd love to see you explore its use more – but perhaps it's not easy to

integrate it into a traditional stage show. Could the incongruous crossover of the nuns have used it to advantage? – I noticed a certain hiatus. You have built a company who are confident and comfortable working together and consequently respond to the demands you make with cooperation and timing that move the plot along and hold the attention of the audience. And you, as a NODA representative yourself, know that we notice things that most members of the audience don't, so any minor criticism is insignificant in comparison to the overall entertainment of a great evening watching people doing what they love with enthusiasm and spectacle. I think this wonderfully funny show will be performed by other societies in Cornwall now that you have shown them the way. Thank you to everyone on stage and behind, and for the invitation to join you.

Individual Performances

Lawrence Jameson What a challenge to take on a role of this size at short notice! You clearly relished playing with the varying aspects of the character and we particularly enjoyed your slapstick scene as Dr. Shuffhausen. The lines were delivered with pace and understanding and your facial expressions and glances to the audience drew us in.

Freddy Benson A year ago I wrote of this actor, “A promising debut ... I hope you are tempted to return to the stage.” – and here he is back again in a leading role! That's progress. This is a role that allows you to go completely over-the-top in playing Ruprecht, the alter ego of the novice con artist, prepared to do anything to learn from the more experienced one. You convincingly handled the differences as he became more confident to use his own wiles – just be careful not to allow yourself to be upstaged as we don't want to lose your facial expressions, which we did as you bravely walked to Christine by the bed.

Andre Thibault One might consider this role a parallel with Crabtree in *'Allo, 'Allo* – a delightfully comical French policeman, who in this case though is in cahoots with the criminals. You showed us his romantic side in your dalliance with Muriel and I was fascinated by your active listening in the scenes where another was the focus of attention. Your duet on the balcony was tuneful and engaging.

Christine Colgate You neatly maintained your secret until the denouement being all wide-eyed innocence apparently taken in by the tricksters. Confident and well controlled singing from an experienced actress.

Muriel Eubanks This role is given more status than in the film and provides a side story of romance for Andre, which you conveyed decorously and amusingly. Clear and sharp delivery with entertaining, knowing expressions. You brought character to all your songs.

Jolene Oakes This character becomes the sole representative of all the women fleeced by Lawrence in his years of successful 'business'. How has he staged the break up from all those clinging women without a 'brother'? You were energetic in your song and dance number and the scenes with Ruprecht were among the funniest in the show in their bold physicality.

Ensemble Remember there are no small roles and someone is watching each one of you. You brought character to the different parts you played, the hotel receptionist was a glowing example, and niftily moved the furniture on and off stage without becoming scene shifters.

Oriel Bennett
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