

# **CORNWALL DRAMA ASSOCIATION**

A service to amateur drama in Cornwall  
CDA Adjudication of a Musical

## **St Austell Amateur Operatic Society Production of Guys and Dolls**

Seen on 9<sup>th</sup> April 2014 by Jo Nicolle and Margaret Cortis

This report and comments therein can only relate to the particular performance seen by the Adjudicators, and any observations made may not have been valid at other performances. The Adjudication report is designed to applaud excellence, to recognise talent and to encourage self-reflection which leads towards higher standards in Amateur Theatre in Cornwall.

### **INTRODUCTION**

Based on Damon Runyon's 1930s stories, and premiering on Broadway in 1950, this lively Musical has a great pedigree and is currently playing in London. With its four main leads and a number of other delightful supporting roles, some really great numbers and exciting opportunities for choreography, this was a good choice for the talents of St Austell AOS. One task for the Director is not to let the iconic musical elements overwhelm the dramatic tale, and to give the quirky humour its share of the limelight. Another is how to accommodate the many quick scene changes without disrupting the flow of the narrative. How the Director, cast and creative team met these challenges is detailed below.

### **STAGE PRESENTATION**

#### **Sets and set dressing:**

A very good impression of the busy New York setting for the show, allowing ample space for the energetic movement in the opening number.

An open stage, flanked by wings constructed to look like towers of crap-shooting dice, showed a street scene near to Broadway and Times Square – the neighbourhood being delineated by lit signs indicating 'Show', 'Movies' and 'Theatre' (this last oddly spelled -re rather than the more common American -er, but we understand this was a hired set, so perhaps not within the purview of St Austell AOS to alter). Moveable flats gave us the Hot Box, Mindy's cheesecake shop, opening doors to the 'Save A Soul' mission, with an M-G-M record advertisement above and a fire hydrant by the doors, and a newsstand complete with advertisement posters and rows of papers. These were revolved or removed during the performance, and allowed the interior of the Hot Box, with tables 'à deux' complete with cloths and pretty little working table lamps, in booths, creating an intimate night-club atmosphere; a telephone booth; the 'Save A Soul' interior, dressed with notice boards, old benches and chairs and a somewhat battered desk with its pamphlets and a large Bible – all these being shown as parts of that slightly sleazy area of New York. Other 'broken outline' flats took us to a Cuban Bar and to the dingy underground sewer system in NYC with a set of

steps upstage, and imposingly tall arches adding to the drama of the craps game and Sky's important dice roll. The lit manhole entrance to the Sewer was a good comic and dramatic touch. This was a clever choice of set, being moved efficiently by the cast between scenes, with the orchestra providing the minutes of linking music for the transformations to be completed. The only time there was a tiny hitch was the unseen hand moving part of the Havana Bar wall away from the rather impressive palm tree, to allow the actors ease of movement in their choreographed steps during *If I were a Bell*. Otherwise, the set worked well to render the back streets of New York City in the late 1930s, and the bleak, tired looking Mission Hall in contrast to the cosy but tawdry glamour of the Night Club with its pinky red ruched curtain covering the back, star spangled, wall. It was nice to see the delicate gold coloured chairs of the Hot Box replaced by bentwood chairs in Havana, and sturdier plain wooden ones joining the benches in the Mission Hall – nice attention to detail in the set dressing overall.

### Lighting:

Banks of barn door parcans and LEDs, with moving heads and a few breakup gobos, mounted above the stage and at the front of the auditorium, provided a subdued wash for the street scenes, and the flashing signs for the show's opening. The underground craps game was correctly more darkly lit, with some dramatic shadows, and the Hot Box was rightly welcoming with warm reds and apricots in the alcoves. The Mission Hall was fairly stark and cool, while the Havana Bar was marked with a concentration of light on the centre where the action was, leaving the stage sides dim, the better for the striking choreography of the scene. The strings of lights added to the gala atmosphere. The 4am *My Time of Day* was not very different light-wise from any other time outside – might it have been possible to have a street light, or an indication of an early dawn? Colours played their part in some of the dance numbers, especially noticeable in the alternate hot reds and greens on the dice in Cuba. The cold blue spotlights as Sky shoots the all important dice at the craps game, and the sudden blackout, were most effective, as were spots on individuals for monologues or musical numbers. In all a good lighting design for the production.

### Sound:

Musical numbers are commented on elsewhere, so here we note sound effects and the use of face mics. These were usually well cued – Nathan Detroit seemed to lose his amplification during a speech in the sewers, but the actor simply projected his voice to cover the loss. Sound levels were good to match orchestration in songs, and spoken dialogue was quite clear, though on a couple of occasions an actor appeared to be saying something on exit which was mostly inaudible: one example being when the carnationed gamblers and Big Jule are ready to go to the craps venue, and “She's gone” seemed to be heard, presumably referring to Sarah Brown going to Cuba (was this just the ‘Rhubarb, rhubarb’ to get off? Or a line that didn't quite get heard?) The 1930s music welcoming the audience into the theatre consisted of a good variety of ballads and dance tunes, and set the scene nicely. Sound effects of a twin propellor aircraft and the drip, drip underground were authentic and at a good level for audience recognition without distracting from dialogue. The gun shots during Detroit's telephone call with Joey Biltmore were loud and funny especially in juxtaposition to the laconic voice afterwards.

### Properties:

The musical instruments of the Save A Soul Mission band were exactly right with their jolly (and slightly depressing!) tambourines and triangle, with the bass drum of a suitable size and timbre. The placards were readable and of a sensible size. Carnations and gardenias were attached

efficiently, and the racing columns in the authentic looking papers read convincingly. Characters leaned on each others' shoulders to write their 'Markers', and money changing hands in the crapshoot was realistic looking. Pamphlets, and the large Bible were good – though Sarah hadn't gone far enough into the Old Testament to reach Isaiah to check her reference. The various garish cocktails with all the frills and furbelows in the Martini glasses looked convincingly kitsch – until the contents stayed firmly and solidly put when tilted either on the tray or by the drinkers – possibly that was better than having a lap full of liquid! And the Cuban coconut vessels were right, as were the enamelled tin mugs at the Mission. The handbag in the opening sequence was slickly thrown and caught, and other bags, like Adelaide's hatbox and her large vanity case looked right for period. Nicely-Nicely ate enough cheesecake and other groceries to satisfy the script and managed clear articulation through the crumbs. The card game by the down-and-outs was discreet but noted. Adelaide and her friends banged their kitchen pans with wooden spoons and with aplomb, and she used the liquor bottle in brown paper to good effect, though it was very obvious that the bottle in the paper bag was empty. The microphone stand for the Hot Box MC was authentic looking and the sound a little echoing which was good.

### Costumes and make-up:

Costumes were a good mix of authentic 1930s shapes and bright Musical Theatre hues. The gamblers in their colourful suits contrasted nicely with Big Jule and Harry the Horse in dark grey and pinstripes to match their darker characters (white tie on black shirt was a neat touch). Detroit looked right with a pork pie hat and patterned waistcoat under his sober suit, and Sky was correctly dapper in his braces and crisp white shirt, with the lovely Co-respondent shoes. Rusty Charlie looked good in rust and beige, and Benny in the green pinstripe and Nicely-Nicely in that garish blue check with a great mustard bowler made a good comedy duo in looks. The girls' floral prints were pleasantly ubiquitous. The Mission garb of black Pioneer bonnet and red costume and cape was neatly uniform and it was nice to see the detail of Sergeant's stripes on sleeves, and the gold trim to General Cartwright's cloak. Arvide's male equivalent looked fine, with the peaked cap and braid trimming, and Sky looked a bit more 'Busboy' than Soul Saver at the end – though that possibly makes the humorous point of his 'conversion'. Miss Adelaide was just right in the wide legged trousers and flowing lightweight coats, with hat and gloves accessories, and a peachy-pink swansdown trimmed peignoir with fluffy sandals, and her short wedding outfit was nicely fitted and matched with posy bouquet and hat with veiling. The 'Down-and-Outs' in grubby faces, scarves and fingerless gloves, with shabby raincoats and caps, or old jumper and skirt, were fine. In the opening sequence the street walkers had a hint of vulgarity in their dress and makeup: the black satin with the red belt and high slit skirt was perfect for the rather impressive 'splits'. The police in their NYPD uniforms were able to high step across the stage, and the nuns in their veils were a nice touch, though one was clearly in a bright red (Mission costume?) skirt under her coat, which was odd for a nun! (It is recognised that backstage space and necessary speed of change may not allow for every costume to be perfect!) The raincoat lined with illicit watches for sale was humorous. The Hot Box dancers looked fine in gingham and denim for their first number – the galvanised tin pails with large carrots were good for the song – and the pink swimsuits under the wrap around skirts and mink stoles worked really well with the platinum blonde wigs and the black satin gloves. In Havana the nod to the Cuban Rumba in costume, with the frilly swishing skirts, was warmly colourful, contrasting well with Sarah Brown's demure grey panelled dress. We saw good attention to detail in the tie clips, knife edge breast pocket handkerchiefs and a good '30s style selection of fedoras, trilby and pork pie hats, and good shoes for all the cast. One note about

hats and trousers: some of the ensemble ‘hitched’ the knees of their trousers when sitting – which would be right for the era and characters in their fine suits, but others didn’t; equally, some removed hats – often placing them on tables in the Hot Box – while others didn’t. This is a small point of consistency and may be considered ‘nit-picky’, but attention to detail is important, and in a company and a show where there is so much to praise, it is worth trying for perfection. Hair was well slicked back for the female cast members taking male roles, and make up was correct for the lights, with the exaggerated mouths and eyes of the Hot Box girls for the ‘showgirl’ look, and the ‘no make up’ look for the missionaries. In all, the costumes were well chosen and added to the visual values of the production.

## **STAGE DIRECTION**

The many set changes were executed with quiet efficiency, and with little or no disruption to the flow of the plot. Cast exits and entrances, even with the Company numbers, were slick and confident, and the street scenes were particularly well organised with everyone maintaining his/her character. Those sequences with lots of ‘random’ passing personae were nicely framed in terms of groupings, variation in pace, and had clearly been well rehearsed for interest and verisimilitude: in the *Guy and Dolls* script these vignettes are very detailed, so obviously seen as important in the eyes of the original production, and it was nice to see the same consideration to the ‘peripherals’ as to the main characters and storyline here. The highlighting of the music and dance against the central story of love, loss and redemption (not to mention the drama of the illegal craps game!) was well-balanced, and the numbers smoothly linked into the narrative. Diction was always crisp and clear, and projection, though assisted by the use of face mics, was good. This experienced cast probably needed little reminding of the basic stagecraft rules regarding voice and gesture, but it would still be necessary to direct the flow of movement and dialogue for naturalism and the audience’s absorption into the plot, and there was evidently much attention to detail in the timing of the comic and the emotionally charged moments. New York accents were well held, with enough variation to suggest Big Jule and Harry the Horse might come from ‘out of town’ ie Chicago. Characterisation within individual performances is often a mix of actors’ intuition and experience, and directorial control. More is said under the ‘Individual Performance’ section, but here we mention the evident understanding of each of the Ensemble characters, whether keen or fed up Mission workers, or excited, elated and downcast Crap shooters etc, who by facial expressions and stance embodied their small parts as well as the Principals. Of these Principals, we saw what we expected with the defined characters, except for an aspect of Sarah Brown. She appeared downbeat and defeated too quickly, and instead of the anticipated prim and reserved, yet passionate about her calling, persona, we saw a slightly aggressive cross character. We wondered if this was a directorial choice to move away from the character that most people will know from the Jean Simmons performance in the 1955 film, if so, it was definitely an interesting interpretation, and it is the prerogative of every company to ‘find something new’ in a well known script. In general, timing, pace and attack were all very good, and this was a well directed piece of theatre.

## **MUSICAL DIRECTION**

It was lovely to hear a live orchestra performing both with the singers and in the linking pieces and the opening medley overture. Volume levels were right for the mic’d vocalists, and there was

good timing in the musical introductions to the numbers. The dramatic opening music was appropriate for the busy street action on stage, getting the show off to a brisk start. *Fugue for Tinborns* was really well executed by Nicely-Nicely Johnson, Benny Southstreet and Rusty Charlie: the lyrics were clear, the blend of voices balanced, and the humour apparent – well done! *Follow the Fold* was just as it should be – a band of evangelists whose message is more important than performance, nicely underplayed. There were opportunities for some pretty duets, and *I'll Know* showcased two very charming voices in Sarah Brown and Sky Masterson, with some real emotional longing mixed with candour; *Sue Me* allowed Miss Adelaide to display a real talent for fluent intonation in the quick patter, while Nathan Detroit sang in contradistinction the ballad; *Marry the Man Today* gave Sarah and Adelaide the chance to sing with humour, good blending and spot on timing. There was an excitement in the powerful drumming for *Havana*. If *I'll Know* saw Sarah with a good soprano range, then her *If I Were a Bell* gave her a chance to accentuate the prominent rhythm and add a touch of tipsy humour. *My Time of Day* was a nice pensive number for Sky, who also got the chance to sing with real passion and controlled energy in the dramatic *Luck Be a Lady*. *More I Cannot Wish You* was sung by Arvide with great sincerity in a pleasant quiet moment. *A Bushel and a Peck* and *Take Back Your Mink* were good ensemble numbers, sung with fervent conviction, as was *Adelaide's Lament* sung with an amusing mix of interest at her medical discoveries and plaintive longing, and all in the distinctive thick New York City accent. *Sit Down You're Rockin' the Boat* was a great showcase for Nicely's strong and melodious voice, ably backed by the Ensemble, and the *Guys and Dolls*, reprised from the First Act was a good company number to end the show.

## **DANCE DIRECTION**

The Ensemble dance numbers in the Hot Box were properly disciplined in the manner of night club dancers, with some good kicks and a 'Rockettes' style formation floor scissor kicks and turning in a line. The *Take Back Your Mink* became more of a dance drama with the shedding of outer layers and dramatic and precise use of arms and hands in the black gloves to make patterns in tableau. The Crapshooters dance was full of dice throwing gestures and whirling turns, and with the gamblers in an inverted V shape, good use of ripple effect moves. The 'freezes' in this scene, especially in *Luck Be a Lady*, and elsewhere in the production were well held and precise, creating pleasing visual tableaux. The ensemble 'tourists' and Cuban dancers in *Havana* worked well in a combination of more complex Rumba and Mambo style steps and general free flowing dance moves, the lifts with Sarah were quite well executed and looked impressive, and the gradual disintegration into a free for all fight was cleverly done and comical. The use of the benches in *Sit Down, You're Rockin' the Boat* to achieve uniformity in the 'wave' of standing and sitting was good, and Nicely and then General Cartwright atop the desk was both funny and effective. Choreography clearly also played a part in the street scenes, with careful timing for the freeze moments while dialogue takes place.

## **INDIVIDUAL PERFORMANCES**

Nicely-Nicely Johnson:

Good stage presence and a big, tuneful singing voice went with the loud check suit to create the cheery, optimistic and loyal friend to Nathan Detroit. Lively facial expressions and slightly awkward movement as befitted the naïve spirited gambler. Accent well maintained, even through

mouthfuls of food!, and *Sit Down, You're Rockin' the Boat* was performed with energy and aplomb. A good interpretation of the role.

#### Benny Southstreet:

A lovely physical contrast with Nicely-Nicely, the actor here used quick, snappy movements to indicate an intelligent nervy character, and his dialogue was equally pacy and slightly jittery. A strong, very pleasing singing voice and fluidity in the dances showed a well rounded performer with plenty of talent.

#### Rusty Charlie:

A smaller role as the third sidekick to Nathan Detroit, the actor here gave the character a jolly outlook and permanently enthusiastic attitude. With the other two henchmen, the *Fugue for Tinborns* was performed with skill and humour, and this was a pleasing cameo performance.

#### Sarah Brown:

A lovely singing voice, able to project emotion as well as having a very good range, this actor could also move gracefully in the dance routines. Accent was well held – slightly more restrained than others, as befitted her character. We would have liked to see more fervency initially as the energetic young Salvationist out to save souls, and reserved primness rather than depressed defeat at apparent failure in her mission, but the slight tipsiness in Havana was very nicely played, and her dawning and burgeoning confidence during *Marry the Man* was good.

#### Arvide Abernathy:

Sarah's caring relative who sees more than she does was believable in this smaller role. The accent slipped sometimes, but the quietly spoken paternal character was believable, and his song was touchingly sincere.

#### Harry the Horse:

A 'tough guy' in comparison with the rest of Nathan Detroit's betting set, shown by the staccato articulation which was more gangster than gambler. Body language was quite 'square' to other characters, showing his slight distance from them personally. In looks and in mannerisms, this performance put him firmly on the side of Big Jule. A good cameo.

#### Lt. Brannigan:

A bit of a thankless 'straight man' role in the play, this actor managed to imbue Brannigan with enough frustration with and venom against Nathan Detroit to make him a three dimensional character. Swift, decisive steps, a voice that showed irritation, triumph and disappointment, and incisive gestures lifted the character.

#### Nathan Detroit:

We saw both the consummate gambler with a reputation to maintain, and the good hearted suitor who wants to please, in this rounded performance. Nervousness was well depicted, along with a surface confidence required to retain his position in the stratum of society he moves in. Gesture and posture gave us both the brash reliable game fixer and the unsure romantic. Good, strong singing and speaking voice: *Sue Me* was a really heart-felt number.

#### Miss Adelaide:

A believable interpretation of the long term, frustrated fiancée with a strong will of her own. Good, quick but fluid movement and gestures and a very pleasing singing voice all brought the character to life. *Adelaide's Lament* was beautifully performed with the mixture of pathos and comedy required, and the same good comic timing was present in the gradual reveal of her deception to her mother. Her role in *Sue Me* showed an ability to perform a quick-fire patter song

with crisp diction, beautifully harmonised against Nathan Detroit's ballad, with clear emotion. Overall an accomplished performance.

Sky Masterson:

This actor had the attributes required of his character, good looks, excellent singing voice, stage presence. Clever, resourceful and determined, all these elements were present in the actor's interpretation of the role of the suave, charismatic gambler. The change from impulsive chancer to sincere, unfeigned suitor was clear in the actor's manner and tone of voice: the debonair relaxed stance becoming more closed in, and the light bantering tone faltering a little. A good, subtle performance, and a nice light baritone suiting the ballads and the belting *Luck Be a Lady*. Well done.

General Cartwright:

An authoritative performance as the General inspecting the evangelical troops. Her dominant command of the failing mission was nicely contrasted with her enthusiastic naivety regarding the 'repenting sinners', and her moves in *Sit Down, You're Rockin' the Boat* were enjoyably enthusiastic.

Big Jule:

The actor used his size to show us the physically intimidating, cheating Chicago bully. The voice, a little slow and deliberate, was just right, and his slightly lumbering movements worked well to flesh out the character. Good comic timing in the crap shoot scene, especially with his own, 'spotless' dice, and the 'Snake eyes' \$1 bet loss.

Ensemble:

The Hot-Box Girls danced with some precision and great energy in their showgirl numbers, with the requisite permanent smiles and enthusiasm for the nightclub habitués, and good uniformity in details like head turns, arm work etc. *Take back your Mink* was especially effective. The Missionary Band were a good contrast in their earnest demeanour and determined optimism in the face of constant disappointment. The Crap Shooters and the other street characters each had a personality well maintained, and in the Company numbers they supported the Principals, and sang and danced with energy and with real commitment.

The Chorus is such an important part of any Musical production, and this Ensemble deserves much of the credit for the show's success.

## **ENDEAVOUR, ORIGINALITY AND ATTAINMENT**

This piece of Musical Theatre is still as relevant today as when it was written, with its mix of universal themes, adversity and redemption, its comic characters and its sense ultimately of optimism; and St. Austell achieved a high standard of performance in all its disciplines of drama, song and dance. There was evidence of rigorous rehearsal and good teamwork in cast and crew alike, to create a thoroughly entertaining evening, which the audience clearly relished! Thank you for inviting us to share the enjoyment.

Jo Nicolle (Moderating Adjudicator)

Margaret Cortis (Adjudicator)