

Anything Goes

YAOS

Octagon Theatre, Yeovil

29th March 2023

Somerset Fellowship of Drama –David Beach Competition

First Impressions

Thank you for inviting me to adjudicate *Anything Goes* on behalf of the Somerset Fellowship of Drama David Beach Competition. It's always a pleasure to come and watch YAOS, and my expectations for this classic show were very high. Clearly this was also true for the enthusiastic Wednesday night audience – the atmosphere was buzzing and made up for the fact that the house wasn't completely full. I received a warm welcome when collecting my tickets and well-designed programme at the box office, and as always, the company's admin has been impeccable. The Octagon Theatre is a professional theatre, soon to undergo a major upgrade to make it even better, and the audience facilities are very pleasant, with an upstairs bar and eatery. The YAOS Front of House team were very much in evidence, welcoming the audience and making sure everything ran smoothly. It's worth mentioning at this point their well-supported charity collection (at the end of the show) for Roald Dahl's Marvellous Children's Charity – a cause clearly close to the hearts of the group, and evidence of the strong family feeling which exists in YAOS.

Set

The versatile set, from by Scenic Projects Ltd, provided a design which was simple in concept, very well constructed and placed the action perfectly for us on the SS American with its smooth lines and Art Deco styling. The upper level provided a home for the orchestra as well as space for action, and the stairs at each side were very well used to create stage pictures as well as, obviously, for access between the levels. The central section offered a highly adaptable space which again was very well used. At first sight just a section of bulkhead with portholes (lit when required), it opened to reveal a space which was, at different times, two cabins, a double width stateroom for Lord Evelyn, and the Brig, and which was screened with a glitter curtain for Blow Gabriel Blow. I appreciated the attention to detail in the 1930s panelling for the first-class cabins, contrasted with the much rougher finish on Moonface's berth, and the appropriate furnishings for each setting. The Brig, too, really did look like the sort of place you would be keen to get out of! Deck rails were brought on at appropriate moments, which added variety and dramatic point. The set was well dressed with flower stands, garlands, and tables and chairs when required. I mustn't forget to mention "Cole's Bar" – the first scene of the show, set in front of tabs and with a stylish bar, a floral pedestal, a couple of draped tables and an illuminated sign.

Stage management and props

As we are used to seeing with YAOS, the stage management team did a fantastic job. Tables and chairs, sun loungers and the deck rail were whisked on and off almost imperceptibly, sometimes during the musical numbers. This was done brilliantly during *Blow Gabriel Blow*, maybe not quite so well judged during the Reno's reprise of *I Get a Kick out of You*. The set transformation into cabins of the brig was done amazingly swiftly, and evidently securely too.

The props department also did a great job with their period props – not only in sourcing them appropriately but in making sure they were on stage at the right time, in the right place or with the right person. There were some lovely items on display – not least the period wheelchair. There would have been just more two things on my wish list. Firstly, I would have loved to see the band's music stands with something like draped falls, maybe with the ship's name on them. Their modern metal stands did look a little out of place. Secondly, how the audience would have loved it if Mrs Harcourt had had a real little lapdog, even if only on her first entrance! I have seen live dogs performing with YAOS before this, so I know you can do it!

Lighting

The lighting throughout this show was extremely competent, enabling us to enjoy the changing times of day and night on board ship with a range of sky effects including a starry night with moonshine. The cabin areas, when opened, were well lit, which allowed the audience to focus on the action in them, and at other times the deck was enhanced with dramatic low-level lighting. *Blow Gabriel Blow* got appropriately atmospheric red lighting. A job well done, without any particular surprises.

Sound

This was probably one of the best productions, in terms of sound, which I have seen at The Octagon. Having the orchestra on stage at high level is very different from an orchestra in the pit, but the sound balance was brilliant, both for the singing and dialogue over underscore. A big tick from me.

Costume

When costuming for a period piece like this is well done, it is one of the pleasures of the evening. Your wardrobe was lavish, to say the least, and there was plenty to enjoy in the numerous costume changes – the dressing rooms must have been all go! Reno, of course, gets the cream of the crop, and she had some spectacular looks, from her sequined gowns, through her crisp sailor look for *Anything Goes*, to the sparkling showgirl costumes, initially covered by dramatic winged robes, which she and the Angels had for *Blow Gabriel Blow*. The Angels were also well provided with costume, including very stylish cut-away tailcoats for the big tap number, and their signature white dresses – Marilyn Monroes before her time – with coloured gloves and belt. Erma, too, had some great costumes in strong colours, suiting her larger-than-life personality. Conversely, I have never seen a production which puts Hope in anything other than neutrals, and this one, apart from her coin-spotted suit at the

embarkation, was no exception. The lead men were all appropriately attired, with Lord Evelyn getting every opportunity to parade in a range of looks, from dapper blazer and flannels to outrageous Fair Isle knits with plaid plus-fours, and not forgetting his splendid quilted dressing gown. I enjoyed the jaunty look of Spit and Dippy, too, contrasting with their final appearance in top hat and tails.

So were there any downsides to the costuming? A few less-than-great elements caught my eye. While the dancing chorus had great playsuits and tennis skirts for their numbers, which looked perfect, I did feel that the floral dresses of the female passengers were not as stylish as they should have been on such a prestigious liner. I'm also sure that a debutante like Hope would have had a classier wedding dress. The uniforms of the officers and sailors, while appropriate, could have been better fitting. I am sure your costume hire was a big budget item, and the company should have adjusted the uniforms better for you. Little details count for a lot - like making sure that the neckerchiefs of the sailors' uniforms were the same width and length. One of those ties was positively Trumpian! One last costume gripe – do try to make sure that everyone has the same level of formality in their evening dress. It was a very formal era, and if one man is in white tie, they all should be. A gentleman wearing a day-time suit would not be accompanying a lady in evening wear, as in your overture scene.

This is very definite nit-picking, though. The general level of costuming was a delight for the eye and I'm sure the company was thrilled with the garments awarded to them. Credit to your large team of costume supervisors and dressers!

Hair/Wigs and Makeup

You were very successful in creating a genuine 1930s look for both men and women. No separate makeup credit was given in the programme, and the makeup, presumably self-applied, was quite subtle, with appropriate colours. Many of the ladies had styled their eyebrows to the true 1930s pencil line, and this was well worth doing, as the eyebrows are often the key to a particular look. The hairstyles were all appropriate, and most of the wigs, where used, were well fitting, though unfortunately this couldn't be said for all of the ladies' chorus. The principal ladies, though, were perfectly styled, with wigs looking completely natural, and for principals and chorus alike, their wigs and hairstyles stayed in place through all the dancing and other shenanigans, so that's a win!

Musical Direction

YAOS was fortunate in having the services of Jessamy Bowditch as MD of *Anything Goes*, and her orchestra, in full view for the entire show, was on top form. From the start of the overture, we knew we were in for a musical treat. The playing was stylish, with the score giving every instrumentalist a chance to shine, and shine they did. I have to spotlight the trumpet solos in *Blow Gabriel Blow*, but every section had its own high points. The singers were very well rehearsed and confidence was high. There are some great voices in the company, but the clarity of the lyrics is just as important as vocal tone, and every word was well articulated. The tempi were just right and the style of each number well judged. I loved

the crooning quartet of sailors and enjoyed the harmonic enhancement they brought to the musical soundscape.

Choreography

Anything Goes is one of those spectacular 1930s classics which stands or falls by the quality of its dancing. This production not only stood, but tapped, shimmied and tangoed its way to success! There are two sides to the choreography of any show – the creation and the execution – and both were dazzling. Plaudits to Sheila Driver and Dance Captain Leah Driver for their creative ideas and the training of the principals and ensemble. It is rare to see an amateur company so completely together and moving as one, and some of the credit for this must be shared with Jessamy Bowditch for the strong sense of musicality she gave to everyone in the production. The hours of work which Sheila and Leah must have put in with the ensemble, though, were the essential part of creating those ambitious routines which were performed so precisely. Let's start with something apparently quite simple – *Bon Voyage* – the controlled and synchronised leaning of the whole company was done so well and convinced the audience that the SS American was on the move. Immeasurably more ambitious were those big production numbers which, to be honest, are the first thing one thinks of with this show. The title number closed the first act in spectacular style – a crisp, precise, tap-dancing number which was just what the doctor ordered. The placement of almost the entire company on the stage was impressive and, very importantly, everyone looked as if they were enjoying themselves, with heads up and big smiles fixed, rather than worrying about their feet – there was no need to do so as the routine was clearly embedded in everyone's memory! I would particularly like to commend the tap-dancing sailors who looked as if they were having a blast. Furthermore, even after the extended dance breaks, everyone still had the breath to sing! The second act brought us the dramatic *Blow, Gabriel, Blow* – another triumph of choreography which had to incorporate changes of costume and mood. There were inventive touches like Reno picking her way across the sailors lying on the floor and the wonderful synchronised arm movements of the whole company – the whole thing was a true spectacle as well as a key dramatic and musical moment in the show – when choreography serves these elements so well it is really doing its job.

This show has some wonderful song and dance numbers for the principals, as well as the big company numbers, and these too were choreographed imaginatively and performed skilfully. Styles ranged from the sassy (*I Get a Kick out of You*), through the dreamy and romantic (*It's De-Lovely*, with its graceful extensions and lifts) to the intense and the feisty (*The Gypsy in Me* and *Buddy Beware*). All in all, the dance element of this show was a triumph.

Principals

Reno Sweeney: Jennifer Holland-Brewer

From the first moment that you stepped on stage, it was clear that you absolutely inhabited the role of Reno Sweeney - you were made to play her! You looked the part, your energy was tremendous and your dancing and singing superb. Whether making your big entry on the SS American, accompanied by your Angels, belting out the company numbers, or revealing your softer side in the reprise of *I Get a Kick out of You*, you completely held the stage and

the audience's attention and sympathy. One of the challenges of this role (apart from the sheer physical demands, which are immense) is that Reno has to demonstrate her very different relationships with Billy, Moonface and Evelyn through a sequence of duets and dance routines, and you did this perfectly.

Billy Crocker: Nick Harris

Billy plays a truly frenetic role in this show, both driving the plot forward in his quest to claim Hope Harcourt, and responding to every change of circumstance which befalls him. The acting demands are high – as well as assuming a number of different characters during the action, Billy has to start off as the hard-boiled, capable broker for whom Reno carries a torch, before melting into Hope's romantic suitor. You carried all this off convincingly – with your softer side perhaps a little more convincing than the harder edges. Your accent took a couple of minutes to settle in at the start of the show. Your comedic disguises were well managed and very much enjoyed by the audience. Your singing and dancing were great – you partnered Hope beautifully in *De-Lovely*, including some gracefully achieved lifts.

Hope Harcourt: Louise Cannon

In a sense, Hope is the hardest character to play in *Anything Goes*. With everything kicking off around her, she remains ladylike, reserved, and almost entirely passive. As noted above, even her costumes in this show contributed to this impression, although that's not to take anything away from your gorgeous appearance. Hope needs to make her impact by convincing us that, despite her diffidence, she really does have a true romance with Billy, so the duet *It's De-Lovely* is absolutely key to establishing her character in Act One. You made a wonderful job of this, and it really was graceful, romantic and beautifully sung. Hope's character blossomed, as did your voice. Likewise, *Goodbye, Little Dream, Goodbye*, and *All Through the Night* were wistful and showed true emotion, so when you were finally able to end up with your one true love, we were all rooting for you!

Lord Evelyn Oakleigh: Nick Toop

The role of Lord Evelyn – a classic P.G. Wodehouse creation - has endless opportunities for the comic actor, and you made the very most of them, savouring Evelyn's collection and misuse of American slang with impeccable timing, and hilariously playing the gullible innocent during Reno's attempted sting during her visit to your stateroom. Along with the comedy, and despite the character being something of a twit, you had to portray him as a traditionally honourable English gentleman, and then, memorably, turn everything around by revealing "the gypsy in you" and showing Reno, and the audience, that you definitely had fire in your belly! This was a fantastic transformation, and your tango with Reno possibly the moment of the night for me. An extremely accomplished and likeable performance.

Moonface Martin: Luke Whitchurch

Unlike Billy and Evelyn, Moonface's character is pretty consistent, and you gave it your all in creating a stereotypical gangster figure – your accent and physical acting were both great, and you commanded the stage in every scene you were in. *Friendship* was a very enjoyable routine and you and Reno gave us a very believable partnership. Of course, Moonface too has his moment of revelation with the quirky little number *Be Like the Bluebird*, and you

relished the chance to show a different side of your character and a different musical style. One of the most memorable performances of the night.

Erma: Charlie Wood

A performance which was bursting with energy and sex appeal. Yours was one of those characters which always makes the audience sit up and take notice when you are on stage, and as an actor you have the valuable talent of not only giving a great performance yourself, but drawing great performances from those around you. Erma's role is somewhat reduced from that of her incarnation "Bonnie" in earlier versions of the show, and I think we would have all loved to see more of you. Your number *Buddy Beware* with the sailors was delightful.

Elisha Witney: Duncan Wright

A bravura performance as the Yale alumnus turned broker. You were a compelling presence on stage and your *Crew Song* most entertaining. Elisha does have his incompetent side and your confusion could perhaps have come out more in the glasses-stealing scene, but you were a memorably domineering tycoon.

Evangeline Harcourt: Liz Stallard

In this version of the show, Mrs Harcourt demands a very broad-brush performance to match Elisha – she's written as rather a sit-com figure without a lot of subtlety. You produced the goods, with a well-judged comic performance which the audience certainly appreciated.

Other Roles

Captain: David Hallett

You were a very benign presence on the ship and carried yourself as a person of very definite authority, though I would have like to see even more emphasis when your pronouncements drove the plot forward.

Purser: Zack Welfare

You made a dapper, smiling Purser – certainly the person whom passengers would approach with all their complaints and problems – and managed to give the impression that while the Captain called the shots, you were the one really running the ship. You were also a valuable member of the dancing ensembles.

Spit: Bradley Napper and Dippy: Tyler Snowden

I felt I had to list you two together as you made such a perfect double act, scampering around the stage and involving yourselves in any naughtiness which happened to be going forward. There was a great chemistry between you, and although your roles were small, they really were a valuable part of the entertainment.

The Angels: Stephanie Wolfe, Naomi Lawton, Helena Reid and Leah Driver

You made a lovely-looking support group to Reno, embodying the spirit of 1930s starlets perfectly. You looked as if you were enjoying wearing all your different costumes, and all

looked immaculate in them. Your dancing was spot-on and your part in the big production numbers was a pleasure to watch.

Chorus

The ladies and gentlemen of the ensemble are all to be congratulated. Whether you were one of the more sedate and dignified upper class passengers, or tapping away in the big production numbers, you maintained your particular role, were perfectly in position, and sang your hearts out. What more could we possibly ask?

Direction

Directing a show of this magnitude is a huge undertaking, and with the show currently very well known, due to the recent professional production which has also been widely screened, the audience has expectations of watching song and dance numbers which are ambitious, spectacular and performed to the highest of standards. As I hope it is clear from my comments above, Sheila Driver, you certainly achieved this with YAOS, giving the appreciative audience a wonderful evening.

Music and dance are certainly at the top of the priority list for this show – but what about the dramatic content? With a script originally by Guy Bolton and P.G. Wodehouse, the complicated plot is far more than simply a means of providing links between the musical numbers. Its madcap capers, performed by a range of larger-than-life characters, could easily form an entertaining straight play in their own right, and it's very important that the audience is enabled to follow the twists and turns of the mistaken identities and disguises which abound. This was generally well achieved, and you had a superb team of actors delivering for you. There were a few moments when I felt that a little more emphasis and time could have been given to key plot points – for example, the audience needs to take in how important it is to the captain and passengers to have celebrities on board, in order to understand why “Snake-Eyes” is feted instead of being arrested, and this could have been delivered more clearly, but in general, the plot ripped along very nicely and the comedy came across well.

There was only one point at which I thought better directorial choices could have been made and that was the pre-show action, including the overture. Actors were on stage in Cole's Bar from 7.15 as the audience arrived – something which is always entertaining and creates rising excitement for the show to come, and I get that. However, they had very little to do - I am always sorry for the bartender in these situations as the glasses have to get polished so many times! Witney was very comfortable having a solitary drink, we had a couple at a table, and later two ladies came in and then left again, so it was rather a sedate establishment, not really the sort of place Reno would go to. Recorded sound, not from the show, was playing, then the live overture started up from behind the tabs. I thought that that would bring a change of pace, maybe some kind of story playing out in front of us, more people arriving, or those on stage taking action, but this didn't happen, and I thought it must have seemed to the actors a very long time in which to mime conversation.

Moan over! That was just a little sun spot in what was truly an excellent evening and a spectacular performance by YAOS, with an outstanding chorus, superb principals and a real feeling of a very strong team working together as one. Congratulations to the whole company and thank you for inviting me.

Linda Mumford, Somerset Fellowship of Drama

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