

CHARLIE AND THE CHOCOLATE FACTORY

YAOS Productions

Westlands Entertainment Centre, Yeovil

19th March 2025

Introduction

My companion and I were greeted warmly by the Chairman, Geoff Thresh in the middle of a busy, buzzing foyer. We took our seats amongst an excited audience of almost as many adults as children, ready to lose themselves in this much-loved story. The Show started a fraction late but the audience was forgiving as we heard the musicians start to play and the cast burst onto the stage.

Set Design (Marc Batterbury)

I seem to have been making the observation more and more recently that clever use of minimal scenery and large props allows the cast as much room as possible on the stage. This is more often than not due to having a very small stage to work on. Not so in this case, you had a good-sized stage to work with. However, Westlands does not easily lend itself to musical productions and the lack of any real space backstage in which to store scenery or props creates its own unique challenges. You rose to this challenge well and used the minimum of large pieces. The bed was integral to the story but, used on its own, set the scenes in Charlie's house needing very little else on the stage. Likewise, the shop counter, projections and some nice old sweet jars told their tale without the need for more elaborate pieces of scenery and the back projections worked extremely well in enhancing every scene. The scene with the secret traps was excellent – no scenery or props – simply our imagination triggered as a result of your cast's impressive acting. The sweet garden was beautiful. It was busier than other scenes but every item played its part in showing the audience a magical world of wonder and excitement.

Stage Management (Marc Batterbury)

This was a slick production from start to finish. Everything seemed to appear (and disappear) from the stage as it should with the minimum of fuss or delay. The stage was used to its full capacity by the cast who entered and exited with well-rehearsed precision. We were able to see the cast clearly, however many were on the stage, with no crowding. I particularly liked the entrance of the Oompa Loompas from the auditorium. There is a little else to comment on – a testament to the professional, efficient work from Marc and his team.

Props (Angie, Sue, Sharon, Ruth, Christine, Christopher, Mary, Geoff, Pauline & Pauline)

What a team! Props in this particular Show were incredibly important as we entered a fantasy world that the audience have to believe in. In some cases, the use of large props such as the bed told their own story, simply needing the addition of a washing line and back projection to take us back to Charlie's family home. I loved the bed for the four 'oldies'. It was cleverly built and set so that the audience had a perfect view of all four grandparents. Smaller props such as the dart flying across the stage with the use of back projection were very clever and again, the exploding bonbons with the accompanying 'puffs' on the back projection added a touch of realism and fun. The candy floss cones and lollipops were beautiful. Of the smaller props, everything seemed to be in its place at the right time and the little touches, such as the sausages, all added interest. Violet's 'explosion' of course was great use of a clever prop with the body disintegrating into various limbs and pieces of material and I thought 'little Mike' was wonderful.

Sound (Eli Burton)

Sound throughout the Show was excellent and the cast could be heard clearly both in dialogue and vocals. I particularly liked the various sound effects, Augustus Gloop's burp, the Oompa Loompa voice at the end of the phone, the chocolate going into the TV, the siren sounding when Augustus falls into the lake and, of course, the music and bubbling of the mixing room. The whooshing sound in frying pan alley in particular was fantastic. Every sound effect was absolutely on point and added a great deal of fun to the Show. I had the impression of an echo on a couple of occasions which I very much liked – when Charlie's father appeared and when Willy Wonka was the old man – maybe I was just caught up in the moment of the emotion and it was 'just my imagination'?

Lighting (Danny Norris)

Lighting was used very effectively to enhance various scenes throughout the Show – I particularly liked the changes from the darker purple lights as they brightened to the pretty lilacs, pinks and greens as the "It Must Be Believed to be Seen" song moved forward with the promise of what was to come. Lighting was used beautifully as Mum remembered Charlie's Dad and the muted effect certainly helped to bring a sadness to her song. Conversely, the gold spotlights on the golden ticket embraced all the excitement that the ticket produced. The green lighting on Willy Wonka in his 'old man' costume added a slight darkness to the scene and the disco ball depicting a search for TV channels added some fun as did the back TV projections. The Oompa Loompas when they walked onto the stage on each occasion (although they did not have green make up on) appeared to have green faces – clever lighting or again, just my imagination?

So much of this Show relied on the audience's imagination and the back projections were an integral part of this. The projected factory gates worked well with the reporters milling outside and whet our appetites for what we would see within. Moving through the factory, it was the projections that took us from room to room, allowing our imaginations to wander. Being able to see the boat moving forward for example added interest to the scene and the great glass elevator with its slow move up towards the view was impressive. I particularly liked the diagrams/recipes/formulae on the back projection in the Imagining Room.

Costumes (Beth Harris, Stephy Bussell) – incl. hair and make up

Costumes for this show were excellent. I suspect almost everyone in the audience had seen some form of Willy Wonka show or film and we would all have had our own expectations of what he should look like. You did not disappoint – the transformation from shopkeeper to Wonka certainly met my expectations and his costume was wonderful. I particularly loved the touch of Charlie in a matching outfit at the end. All other costumes seemed to be very much of the era and fitted perfectly with their various characters. The costumes of each adult/child pair were matched well - there had obviously been some careful thought going into this. It was interesting to see Violet and Veruca, two young girls dressed so differently, the 'pop queen' and the ballet dancer, from different backgrounds, both a vision of prettiness, but both displaying the same unpleasant characters beneath. Violet's outfit portrayed her typical American young teen lifestyle as did the ballet outfit for Veruca's 'privileged life'. I did like Mr Salt's costume which made a great statement.

Choreography (Martyn Knight)

There is no credit for Choreographer in your programme but Martyn is shown as Director and Choreographer on your flyer so please forgive me if this is not correct and I have missed someone.

The choreography in this Show was wonderful throughout and started as it meant to go on. Our first introduction to Willy Wonka and the ensemble in their "Candy Man" routine was slick and sharp, full of energy and promise of what was to come. As the Show moved along, routines were many and varied in style - all performed with the same high energy and we were certainly spoilt for choice. The fun ballet sequence with the squirrels, the lovely 'optimistic' routine with Mum, Charlie and Grandpa Jo when he gets out of bed, the modern "My Daddy" workout, the winding Contract and the Oompa Loompa routines. Whether dancing as

an ensemble or individuals, we saw well-rehearsed, polished and high energy performances which were lovely to watch.

The introduction of the winning children and their adults was great as they entered the factory – each showing their individuality and we certainly got their measure from the outset. I loved the way every child ‘matched’ their parent in movements, actions, singing and dancing.

There were often a lot of cast on stage – Oompa Loompas – but it never seemed crowded. The Oompa Loompas were impressively structured and synchronized and maintained their serious expressions throughout – the lack of smiles portraying how seriously they took their roles in the factory and a ‘don’t mess with me’ attitude. The Oompa Loompas entrance from either side of the stage in the auditorium was very effective expanding our view of the stage and we saw the disciplined rows of ‘factory workers’.

I particularly liked Mike being lifted out of his chair and Augustus Gloop’s fall into the lake headfirst was excellent and certainly had the audience laughing. The climbing the ladder scene with Grandpa Jo and Charlie was done exceptionally well as they managed to create a lovely suspense as to what they would find at the top.

Willy Wonka had a couple of quick changes – transformations – on stage which were done very well and had clearly been very well-rehearsed.

I thought the acting was great during the secret traps scene and, in particular, I thought Mike’s falls were incredibly well done and his timing was impressive in frying pan alley.

With so many different larger than life characters needing to be heard, this Show was choreographed beautifully with an enormous amount of colour, energy and fun and everyone was given the stage exposure that they deserved.

Musical Direction (Gill Merrifield)

Having a live band accompanying any musical has become a ‘nice to have’ rather than a given in recent years with the challenges of taking up space either on stage or encroaching into the audience. It is all too easy to simply use a backing track instead. Not so here. You positioned your wonderful band in a room tucked away upstairs where neither the band nor cast could see each other without screens. Not only could the audience hear you perfectly but, clearly, so could your cast. Having a screen above their heads on stage was obviously not ideal and I suspect could often not be seen at all from certain parts of the stage. This demonstrated the amount of hard work and rehearsal that must have gone into producing this Show. The cast, principals and ensemble alike were absolutely on point with all their singing, irrespective of whether or not they could see a conductor and all performances were impressive. Your sound balance was perfect between musicians and cast and we were always able to hear the vocals whether soloists or ensemble. The whole cast maintained high energy throughout every song which did not drop away during dance routines. Your offstage chorus was also excellent in supporting their colleagues on stage. It is always a treat to have live music to accompany these shows and this was no exception. Congratulations to you all for making this happen.

Direction (Martyn Knight)

This was an impressive Show filled with energy from the very beginning. Your cast were all well-rehearsed and professional in their performances. Scene changes, lighting and sound were slick and stage management excellent. I think my comments above are testament to how well this Show was directed and it could be seen just how much work had gone into producing such a wonderful Show from yourself and your whole team.

Principals

Willy Wonka (Nick Toop)

You were a wonderful Willy Wonka, Nick. You showed us a fantastic mix of weird and wacky, clever and, just occasionally, a little sad. You were apparently oblivious to the effect your words had on other people but you listened. You were confusing, often coming across as a little mean – how many times did you raise our hopes in the sweetshop when we thought you just *might* give Charlie the chocolate bar only to have them dashed - but somehow, still likeable. As an audience, we had no real idea of what was an act and what was real – the ultimate illusion. You took us with you into your magical world – a ‘mesmerising journey to a world of Pure Imagination’ and we watched with bated breath to see what you would do next. You have a wonderful voice and I enjoyed every one of your solo performances – “Candy Man” and “Pure Imagination” were lovely and in “The View from Here” you held the whole audience. You were ‘sympathetic’ in your duet with Charlie and, despite having the more mature, stronger voice, allowed him to shine matching your voices perfectly. Many congratulations on a fabulous performance.

Thomas Carey (Charlie Bucket)

Well, your previous acting experience certainly paid off in your first role with YAOS Thomas. I loved your performance. You showed us a young man who was incredibly likeable, kind and determined and extremely stoic (seen in “If Your Father Were Here”). A child with an unlimited imagination but someone who understood that dreams may never come true, but it was still ok to dream. Within your difficult family life/circumstances you were accepting of what life had dealt you and humble in your desires. We were with you all the way in your hunt for the Golden Ticket and I absolutely loved your ‘swagger’ at the end with the thumbs up and “my name’s Bucket and I make chocolate”. You delivered this beautifully and, in that moment, it was all about you!

You have a very good, clear voice and sang all your songs exceptionally well. Your duets with Willy Wonka and other principals were excellent and you held your own well against some very strong voices. “Your View From Here” with Willy Wonka was beautiful and the tableau of you both with your arms around each other at the end was lovely. Congratulations on a role excellently played.

Grandpa Jo (Steve Williams)

This was a beautifully played role portraying an old man who may have been in bed for many-a-year but had not lost his spark. You showed us exactly where Charlie’s imagination had come from and his ability to embrace a world of imagination without envy. When you got out of your bed we saw a kind, caring Grandpa with a strength of love for Charlie that would support him no matter what came his way. You have a lovely singing voice and I loved your ‘out of bed’ dance with Charlie and Mrs Bucket. You showed us the Grandpa that any child would wish to have.

Mrs Bucket (Jennifer Holland-Brewer)

This was a lovely portrayal of Charlie’s Mum. You showed us a strong woman who was simply living with the hand that she had been dealt but with kindness and caring. Occasionally brusque but your audience could see the love that you felt for your family, including your husband. Your beautiful singing voice added strength to your character as we shared your emotions and I for one loved the woman that you showed us. We were simply waiting for that magic wand that would transform your life into something that we felt such a beautiful character deserved. Congratulations.

Augustus Gloop (Nicholas Riva)

This was a well-played and confident role. It is very difficult to play such iconic roles that your audiences will often already know and love. We have an expectation of each character and you did not disappoint. You were articulate (with a good accent) and funny and danced and sang well. Needless to say, I loved your tip into the lake and legs in the air as did the whole audience.

Mrs Gloop (Lauren Francis)

You were a wonderful German frau who had clearly always over-indulged the 'little boy', who was the apple of her eye, and continued to do so. Again, you were funny and articulate (nice German accent) and highly entertaining. I enjoyed your 'Germanic' dance routines. You have a lovely singing voice and, of course, the pièce de résistance was the wonderful yodeling.

Veruca Salt (Amelia Meldrum)

This was another confident and well-played role. You were definitely privileged and precocious! You showed us a perfect example of it's not what's on the outside but what's on the inside that matters. Your pretty balletic character hid a multitude of 'horrid' beneath. We saw a self-absorbed, demanding, selfish 'I want' young woman who was able to manipulate Daddy and expected to do this with everyone. She was not used to and did not accept being told no. Your tantrums were wonderful and your singing and dancing lovely.

Mr Salt (Luke Whitchurch)

This was a strong and confidently played role. We saw a strong man who was used to speaking and being heard. We had the impression from your bearing that very few people would say no to you. This façade never slipped. However, we also saw your one weakness – Veruca. You gave in to your daughter's demands every time but never once lost your presence in front of others as the man who should be listened to and obeyed. The façade remained, despite your daughter's constant demands and tantrums. You have a great singing voice and I liked your Russian accent.

Violet Beauregarde (Josie Whitmore)

This was a lovely caricature portrayal of a sassy young American teen with attitude. You showed us everything we would expect to see in the cliché 'Queen of Pop' – a young woman having made a name for herself from 'nothing' (gum chewing) and living her life based around this following, believing completely in her own hype of her talent and fame. You were Daddy's little girl and Daddy simply bought into your self-illusion. You were certainly a match for Veruca. I'm not sure who knocked who in passing at one stage but we could certainly see the dislike from both of you. I thought your accent was very good and you sang and danced well.

Mr Beauregarde (Callum Longmuir)

As Violet's indulging father, you certainly helped show us what a little horror she really was. You pandered to her every whim and clearly worshipped the ground she walked on in the same way as her 'followers'. As with the other parents and their children, you showcased her beautifully and we saw the 'can't say no' attitude over and over again. Your shock when she blew up was wonderful to watch.

Mike Teavee (Harrison Waterhouse)

You were a great 'TV layabout' Harrison and we certainly believed that your life consisted of TV and more TV with very little else. You tolerated your Mum's antics simply because the more involved she was, the less you seemed to have to actually do – even to the point of getting in and out of your chair yourself! I absolutely loved your acting during the secret trap scene. Your timing was spot on when you hit the door and fell backwards, as well as your great timing as the frying pans flew. All your falls were realistic and looked as if you had been knocked by something or someone. We finally saw a spark from you in the 'mini' tv scene – a

desire for adventure or escape? – for something more than your own ‘four-walled’ life. We actually felt just a little sympathy for you when you miniaturised – out of the frying pan..... This was a well-played and funny role.

Mrs Teavee (Charlie Wanklin)

Well, not very far into your performance the words ‘nut job’ popped into my head! An ‘intoxicating’ role or simply intoxicated? You played this role beautifully. A mixture of overbearing ‘Mummy’ wanting to do everything for her ‘little boy’ and unstable woman using alcohol as a crutch – how much, we were never too sure. Your permanent upbeat excitable personality clearly hid a multitude of insecurities culminating in our seeing an almost manic response to Mike becoming small and, as such, your ‘little boy’ forever. I very much enjoyed this performance.

Grandpa George (Michael Francis); Grandma Josephine (Charmaine Bray); Grandma Georgina (Pauline Withers)

The roles of the 4 grandparents in bed were played beautifully. Although Grandpa Jo took the lion’s share of the dialogue the support and interaction you each gave was invaluable. Each of you portrayed an individual character in your own right and played off one another well. There were some wonderful one-liners amongst your dialogue which were delivered with perfect timing and provided some lovely comedy to the bed scenes. You all showed a love and care for Charlie in your interactions and showed the audience that you were very much one family. I particularly liked the dinner in bed scene.

Jerry (Zack Welfare)

This was a confident and well-rehearsed role and you did exactly what was required as a good link man – to move the story along with short, quick appearances. Your little on air ‘slip’ with Cherry was a fun nod to your relationship.

Cherry Sundae (Fawn Whitchurch)

Another nicely played role showing us an enthusiastic and excitable reporter, lapping up her few minutes of fame with each appearance and we could also see your excitement in the subject itself - finding the golden tickets.

Mrs Green (Lucy Capes)

This was a lovely little cameo role that provided the audience with not only an insight into Charlie’s family life but, also some amusement along the way.

Summary

In summary, I suspect you will have realised just how much I loved this Show. Your two main characters were excellent and had the potential to steal the Show. However, all your principals and ensemble produced great performances that matched and supported Willy Wonka and Charlie. Congratulations to everyone, both in the cast and backstage and thank you for inviting me. I, for one, certainly ‘sat back, relaxed and enjoyed the performance’.

Cathie Warner (Adjudicator)

Somerset Fellowship of Drama’s David Beach Awards