

Somerset Fellowship of Drama
David Beech Competition
YAOS
Come From Away
17/10/2025

Introduction

I have been to many a production by YAOS and was more than excited to be invited to attend and adjudicate their rendition of Come from Away which has recently been granted its amateur licence. Indeed, a great many local groups have managed to get licences to tell the story of the plane people affected by 9/11 in this emotionally powerful show.

Choice of show

The show contains very little choreography and the cast size is small because that there isn't an ensemble per se. I can imagine the casting process given the talent within YOAS and the interest in this show would have been a difficult process. It was nice to see a show which offered so many opportunities to older members of the society and we saw a few returning members who had stepped away from the stage which was lovely to see and hear.

This show is intense and requires a great deal of stamina from its cast who play multiple roles with very little down time. Cast members are required to change persona, costume and accent all without leaving the stage. The significance of changing a jacket, donning a hat or prop instigating the alteration of one's energy and physicality morphing one character into another. It poses a challenge for any actor and I was keen to see how the YAOS cast managed it.

Auditorium pre-set and Welcome

I must admit the buzz as we walked into the bar on our arrival at Westland's was akin to a West End show! After a slight mix up with our seats we sat down and within seconds we were plunged into the reality of 9/11 for the inhabitants of Gander Newfoundland and the plane people.

Direction

I understand from the proforma that you hired in a professional director in the form of Naomi Rose-Mock. This was a smart move with the complexity and challenge this show set its cast and creative team.

The casting was solid, showcasing each actor's unique strengths in both performance and vocal delivery.

I particularly enjoyed the creative use of varying height levels on stage, which added visual interest and depth. It was also clear how much time and care went into rehearsing the positioning of chairs to effectively convey changes in location — a simple yet powerful device that worked incredibly well.

The use of African voice recordings from characters facing the back of the bus did lose some dramatic impact; however, I appreciate that the options were limited given the cast available. There were occasional dips in pace, but overall the production maintained a strong sense of building tension. I look forward to future shows under your directorship.

Set design

The set design was simple in its construction but impressively complex in its functionality given the diverse demands placed upon it. It needed to accommodate a live band on stage, provide suitable entry and exit points for the cast, and convincingly represent multiple settings — from a bar to a sports hall to the interior of an aeroplane. The minimalistic approach was a smart choice, ensuring the audience could suspend disbelief without being distracted by overly elaborate dressing. I did question the use of trees at either side given that most of the locations were indoors but it didn't preoccupy me from what was taking place on stage.

Stage Director/Management

The set stayed static for the duration of the show and the only movement of set in terms of chairs and tables were done by the cast themselves in perfectly executed seamless transitions. This showed how well rehearsed the chair-ography was and was absolutely integral to the show's success. The clever use of height and lighting added interest and helped set the scene.

Props

There were more props used than I had anticipated, ranging from clothing, to boxes, bottles of beer, cans of Coke, and mobile phones. These details helped bring a sense of realism to the production.

From my seat, I couldn't quite tell whether the mobile phones were era-appropriate, but their presence was a thoughtful touch. I did wonder whether perhaps a phone was missing for Hannah in the final scenes, as its absence felt noticeable in the context of the story.

You choose to incorporate a cat carrier but choose to steer clear of a real life chimpanzee cage which I have seen used in other renditions of this show. I didn't mind this because it gave Bonnie the opportunity to face out to the

auditorium rather than into a cage which was much more powerful for us as an audience.

Sound

You hired in a professional sound team for the show. The sound quality was generally clear, with all cast members wearing radio microphones, which helped maintain consistency. However, there were a few noticeable delays in microphones being turned up at the start of some lines. At times, the cast's voices were slightly overpowered by the on-stage band, particularly during scenes with background music or singing. A slight adjustment to the sound balance in those moments would have helped maintain clarity.

Lighting

You hired the lighting team from the Westland's venue. The lighting design in the opening scene immediately set the tone, with red lighting effectively conveying a sense of emerging emergency.

The use of torches to illuminate faces worked particularly well in representing air traffic controllers, adding a sharp visual focus. A later moment where light was projected laterally to mimic the glow of a TV onto the faces of those on the plane was especially striking.

The spotlight on pilot Beverly during her solo number created an intimate and powerful moment. However, I did notice the frequent late lighting cues, which left some cast members speaking in darkness — a distraction that slightly disrupted the flow of a few scenes.

Costume

The costumes, sourced from within the society, played an integral role in the success of the cast's ability to seamlessly shape-shift into their various alter egos — often right in front of the audience.

Clever use of jackets, waistcoats, hats, and scarves allowed for quick and effective changes, clearly designed with speed and practicality in mind. While there were occasional moments — such as someone pulling a top over their head — that briefly slowed the pace, these were minor and infrequent.

The white coats worn by the cardiologists added a great touch of humour however, I felt the scene could have been taken even further with the addition of latex gloves or stethoscopes! Overall, the costumes were well chosen and thoughtfully used, helping support each character's journey in becoming more like a Newfoundlander!

Hair and Make up

Hair and make-up were appropriately understated, reflecting the early 2000s setting without drawing attention away from the performances. Hairstyles were neat and secure, allowing cast members to transition smoothly between their multiple roles without distraction. The make-up was subtle and unobtrusive — exactly as it should be — ensuring the focus remained on character and storytelling rather than appearance.

Band and musical direction

The 8-piece band sat upstage right, providing a strong and consistent musical foundation throughout the performance. Your musical director who was professionally hired, positioned at the keys sat with his back to the audience, a very difficult position to keep both cast and band together. The band remained largely unobtrusive — aided by low lighting that allowed them to blend into the background while still making their presence felt through the music. I didn't notice any glitches or stilted transitions; the stamina and fluidity of the playing was impressive. A particularly enjoyable moment was when the drummer stepped forward to play the ugly stick (or ciderphone), briefly bringing the band into the dramatic picture. This was a lovely touch, and I found myself wishing it had been extended further — especially during the lively bar scene when the plane people were encouraged to "kiss the fish."

Vocal

With a cast of 14, every performer needed to have a strong voice — and they delivered. Much of the show relied on full-company numbers, leaving no room for weak links. The singing was clearly well-rehearsed and impressively complex, so I applaud the hard work that went into achieving such cohesion. Nick and Diane's duet stood out for its sincerity, while Beverly's demanding solo *Me and the Sky* was a true feat of vocal stamina, energy, and impeccable diction.

The added challenge of maintaining vocal accuracy while singing in accent made the performance all the more commendable. With no interval to allow for vocal rest or even a drink, the cast's endurance was genuinely impressive. The only moment where I felt the vocals faltered slightly was during *Make Me a Channel of Your Peace*, where the harmonies felt a little unbalanced — though this was a small dip in an otherwise vocally strong production.

Choreography

While this show didn't feature much traditional choreography, it made excellent use of "chair-ography," as I've mentioned in the stage direction and management. Heel tapping in time often proves more challenging than a full dance routine, requiring every cast member to be perfectly synchronized—and they pulled it off. I especially enjoyed the lively movement and sense of frivolity during the bar scenes, which brought a joyful energy to the performance.

Individual Performances

Diane – Jennifer Holland Brewer

Having seen Jennifer in other YAOS productions, I knew we were in safe hands—and she did not disappoint. Her strong acting skills were perfectly suited to this role, striking a wonderful balance between high energy and deep emotion, especially in contrast to Nick's calm English resolve. She brought a great deal of humour to the character—I genuinely laughed out loud when she flashed inside her cardigan! Her duet with Nick, *Stop the World*, was beautifully sincere and moving. Throughout the performance, her voice and accent were consistently excellent. Truly an outstanding job.

Hannah – Helena Reid

I read in your programme bio that this role was outside your comfort zone, so first of all, I want to applaud you for taking on such a challenge and showing us a different side to your talents.

Your portrayal of an anxious mother deeply concerned for her son's safety was heartfelt, though I felt the emotional intensity could have been pushed further physically, as some of it was lost for those of us seated at the back.

Your efforts to bond with Beulah over her terrible jokes were genuine, and I could feel the warmth of that connection in your performance. Your solo *I Am Here* showed considerable promise, and I hope you take away confidence and congratulations for a job well done.

Janice – Amelia Meldrum

Your clear diction and consistent accent were impressive throughout the performance. The excitement you conveyed about your first real job was both believable and engaging, and you came across as genuinely likeable. Your movement was smooth and effortless—no surprise, given your dance training mentioned in the programme. You remained fully engaged at all times,

delivering a great interpretation of the physicality required for each role you played. While you didn't have any solo singing, your contributions to the company numbers were vital to the overall energy and cohesion of the show, especially since most musical pieces involved the full cast. Well done.

Beulah – Karen Pankhurst

Having previously seen you in the Witches of Eastwick for MPO I knew we were in good hands with you cast as Beulah. It felt as though you had the most lines to learn out of everyone, and you handled them with confidence and clarity. Your acting skills were excellent, and your accent was consistently on point. A genuine sense of friendship with Hannah emerged naturally through your performance, and your portrayal of a strong, grounded character was very well executed. Your facial expressions were particularly effective in bringing depth to the role, and I loved the subtle humour and sarcasm you brought to the character. While you didn't have a solo singing moment, your vocal contribution was integral to the overall sound and impact of the company numbers. A job well done.

Bonnie – Jodie Glover

This was truly a standout supporting performance. Your accent was excellent and consistent throughout, and your natural physicality and strong characterisation really brought Bonnie to life. You portrayed a determined, compassionate woman who wasn't going to be told what to do when animal welfare was at stake! I was particularly impressed by the moment you spoke to the animals facing out to us the audience — it was so believable, it became a truly powerful and moving scene. Your acting felt effortless and utterly convincing. This role was a perfect fit for you, and it was clear you really enjoyed playing Bonnie. A huge well done.

Beverly – Elly Driver

Your accent was excellent and remained consistent throughout the performance, even during your solo, "*Me and the Sky*." This number was an absolute feat of vocal agility – incredibly fast-paced and full of tongue-twisting lyrics, which you navigated with impressive clarity and control.

Your tone in the lower registers was simply beautiful, rich and resonant. While the higher registers occasionally felt a little strained, the emotional pressure in your delivery actually added to the rising tension of the piece, enhancing your

portrayal of the Captain's growing sense of responsibility. This depth gave the character real weight and authenticity.

You transitioned seamlessly into a humorous, ever-so-slightly infatuated character, providing a striking contrast both in personality and physicality. This shift was handled with great skill and timing, and you brought charm and comedy to the role. I felt you coped with the demands of this role admirably. Overall, I was very impressed with your performance.

Micky/Flight attendant – Lucy Capes

You took on multiple characters with clarity and purpose, each one contributing meaningfully to the storyline. Your versatility was impressive, and you played a vital role in maintaining the overall flow and ensuring smooth transitions between scenes.

Your singing within the company was consistent and confident throughout, and you remained fully engaged and in character at all times. Your accent was excellent and sustained across roles, adding further authenticity to your performance.

You should be really proud of what you achieved on stage – a strong, committed, and essential contribution to the success of the production. Well done.

Delores/customs officer – Sian Spencer

What a joy to watch you take on such fun and contrasting roles. You portrayed the anxious passenger — plied with alcohol to calm your fears at being trapped on the plane — with genuine skill and believability. Your comedic timing shone through in your rendition of "*My Heart Will Go On*," bringing a wonderful sense of humour to the moment.

The transition to your role as the composed customs officer was seamless, showing your versatility and control on stage. You moved effortlessly between characters, each clearly defined and well executed.

Your contribution to the overall vocal sound of the company was strong and consistent. Well done on a thoroughly enjoyable and committed performance.

Oz – David Hallett

You demonstrated excellent, clear diction and a committed accent across all your roles — from the policeman to the bus driver to the Jewish man. Each character was distinct, and your acting skills ensured smooth transitions between scenes.

Your quick changes were impressively seamless; I wasn't even aware of them happening, which is a testament to your professionalism and preparation. Vocally, your singing was clear, in tune, and well-blended with the company sound. A strong, versatile performance – well done!

Kevin T – Nick Harris

You portrayed your character with sensitivity and authenticity, steering clear of clichés while still clearly communicating his identity. The contrasting energy between you and your on-stage partner, Kevin J, was highly effective — it created a believable sense of emotional distance, making it clear to the audience that the relationship was strained and disconnected.

Your character's openness to embracing everything Gander had to offer further highlighted this emotional divergence, making the separation from your partner feel natural and convincing.

Your opening solo in *"Make Me a Channel of Your Peace"* was truly beautiful. You delivered it with sincerity and restraint, allowing the simplicity of the song to shine through. It was a poignant moment that effectively bridged the years and themes of the show, setting the tone with quiet strength and emotional clarity. A touching and grounded performance that added real depth to the story. Well done.

Kevin J – Rob Reid

You brought great comedic timing to this role, creating plenty of memorable moments. Your scene with Delores on the plane was especially enjoyable — full of energy and sharp delivery. As the show progressed, we could clearly feel your character's growing frustration and emotional distance from Kevin T, which added depth to the performance.

Your transition to the Egyptian chef was impressively distinct, with clear changes in both physicality and vocal delivery. It was a strong example of your versatility on stage.

As an audience, we felt in safe hands — your acting was confident, and your contribution to the company's vocal work was solid and consistent. A thoroughly engaging performance. Well done!

Bob – Pedro Meredith

As a newcomer to YAOS, it was clear from both the programme and your performance that you fully embraced the spirit of the show. You demonstrated impressive versatility, effortlessly taking on multiple roles — from Bob, to one of the cardiologists, to the fanciable pilot — with clear physical and costume changes that helped define each character.

Your portrayal of Bob was particularly moving. We watched him gradually relax into his new environment and begin to feel truly accepted by the Gander community. The development of trust and connection was sensitively and believably portrayed, and your audience felt every moment of that journey.

A strong and sincere performance — a fantastic debut. Well done!

Claude – Duncan Wright

You took on the role of the Mayor of Gander as your principal character, alongside a variety of minor roles, and delivered a confident, engaging performance. You brought an air of authority to the role of Claude, with just the right sprinkle of comedy and a generous dollop of sarcasm — a combination that suited the character perfectly.

There were a few minor moments where accent and diction slipped slightly, but they didn't detract from the strength of your overall performance. You contributed significantly to the pace and energy of the show and were an integral part of the company.

A strong, characterful portrayal — you were perfectly cast as Claude. Well done!

Nick – Ed Creswick

Having recently seen Ed perform as Enoch Snow in *Carousel* at the Little Theatre in Wells, it was a pleasure to see him return to the stage in such a contrasting role. You played the perfect Englishman with poise and authenticity. Your ability to maintain a consistent accent — especially while surrounded by American and Irish voices — was particularly impressive.

Your portrayal brought a calm, steady presence that perfectly balanced Diane's moments of emotion and panic. This dynamic made your scenes together especially engaging and emotionally grounded.

The duet "*Stop the World*" was a real highlight — sincere, beautifully sung, and entirely believable. It was a moving and honest performance that truly connected with the audience. Well done on another memorable role!

Conclusion

Many thanks to the cast and creative team for bringing this production of *Come from Away* to life for your audience and for inviting me to review on behalf of the David Beech competition. Thank you for making me feel welcome and for sharing this important and thought-provoking story with us.

Martha Francis