



ROSE BOWL ADJUDICATION

Name of Company: Yeovil Amateur Operatic Society (YAOS)

Name of Production: COME FROM AWAY

Venue: Westland Entertainment Centre, Yeovil

Date: Tuesday 14th October 2025

Adjudicator: Caroline Whitehead

A good evening of entertainment

Come From Away is founded on a true story of the impact of 9/11 on a small town in Newfoundland when 7,000 people arrived in 38 planes at the airport in Gander. Who knew how much generosity and love would emerge from that crisis that shocked and divided the world ? It's an emotional tale of human kindness in dark times and your audience responded to that with rapt attention and applause at appropriate moments.

It was well directed and combined some powerful ensemble singing with some tender solo and duet scenes. The multiple use staging worked well for the most part, together with the versatility of chairs, and we got used to the change of characters from residents to 'plane people' ad back again.

Clearly, the audience were delighted with the production and were moved by the amazing story that you were telling. It was lovely to have your live band accompanying the show and nice to see them on stage. The music in this show is so vital to the vibe of the piece and we all wanted to enjoy the Celtic folk music that is so rooted in the Newfoundland folk traditions. For me, there were occasions when the volume of the band drowned the lyrics, particularly in the solo moments, and that was a shame because that dialogue is so important to the story. That said, you conveyed some real energy into the show and we were certainly transported to Newfoundland.

Staging

When I first arrived, I was worried that the set felt a little busy and I was wondering how the various elements of it would be used. As the show unfolded, I could see the use of the bar area, but some of the other props looked surplus to requirements – the trees for example – and from the back of the auditorium the various props just blurred the impact of the performers on stage, particularly with those dappled gobos. This is a show I have seen many times and really the chairs are the most important element so that you can smoothly transition from plane to bus to bar etc.

Band and Sound

As a musician and former MD myself, I know that the human response to music is so profound and in this show especially plays a central role. I am always delighted to see a live band on stage and there was no doubt that you were an accomplished group of performers. My slight reservation was that your conductor and leader was facing away from the action on stage and there were times when the band was rushing ahead and leaving performers in their wake. I felt it particularly in that beautiful solo: Me And The Sky, when there needed to be a stronger connection with the pace of the vocals and the accompaniment. There are some really important lyrics in this song and they felt rushed. I also felt that the drum beat (effective as it was) sometimes drowned out the lyrics and this was a shame. The sound balance worked really well when everyone was singing in those powerful ensemble numbers, but felt a little out of kilter in the smaller ones and where there were individual lines within a song. I would have turned up the fiddle and other strings.

That first number – Welcome to the Rock – established a pace that was sustained throughout the show, but in the slower moments, such as I Am Here, which is a heartbreaking number, the pace needed to come right down and I felt that this one was a bit lost.

One of the vital elements of this show is to ensure that the dialogue is clear. These performers are telling a story and we need to hear every word of their multiple characters. Those operating those mics have their work cut out and I don't underestimate the challenge of those one-liners. However, there were some occasions when we missed the start of some of the dialogue so I hope that you managed to tighten up those sound cues.

Lighting

I am always very tuned in to lighting design and in this show it is very important to focus on individual performers. This is a challenge because of those very quick pieces of dialogue that have to be heard and faces seen. You had given yourselves quite a job with this wide stage and the various mini sets that you had set up and I didn't think that you quite managed the tight lighting cues that you needed. There were too many occasions when performers were in darkness at the start of their lyrics or dialogue and we lost the impact of their contribution to the story. There are lots of important lighting states to achieve when there is so much action on stage, so this is a big challenge and I hope that things get better for you as the run progresses.

Choreography

Choreography is so much more than the dance routines and, although you had a few of these as well in this show, much more important are the movements of performers across the stage – in the plane, in the buses and in the many group numbers where the blocking is so vital.

At the start of the show, I wondered if there was enough energy in Welcome to the Rock and perhaps there was too much standing around bobbing up and down. This is such a strong number to start the show, I think you could have done more with choreography. And in the big party when everyone was starting to just let go and enjoy themselves, you could have had more movement again.

There were times when I wasn't convinced that everyone was sure of their movements and their physical interaction with each other and just occasionally the stage looked a bit too confused and complicated.

Although this show is mostly about the dialogue and lyrics – you are telling an important story about humanity – it is also an opportunity to use physical gestures and movements to show how, very gradually, the hostility and fear morphs into warmth, welcome and compassion. The physicality of those emotional changes adds another dimension to this show and there were some opportunities lost to show these shifts.

Costumes

This is a contemporary story and so costumes were fairly straightforward. The challenge of course is the subtle changes that some characters had to achieve, often very rapidly. The addition of a hat, a jacket helping us to recognise a different character was well handled, supported of course by a changed posture or accent.

Company

When I have reviewed this show in the past (both amateur and professional productions) I have not commented on individual performances, because as well as actors playing many roles, the success of the show relies on the teamwork of the cast as a whole. However, there were a few standout moments from performers who had their moment on stage and I will just single them out. That doesn't mean that others who are not mentioned below did anything other than an excellent job; it's just that the opportunities for memorable moments didn't come their way quite as often.

Diane – you are a good actor and I was totally convinced by your growing affection for Nick. This was a good relationship development and your dialogue was strong and bold.

Hannah – I really enjoyed your lyrical voice in I Am Here but I was sad that the band rather raced through it. It is a glorious piece of theatre and you handled it sensitively. We felt your pain. The intensity of a mother's love for her son played by Hannah is something that lots of the audience could relate to and our hearts empathised with your pain and anxiety. This pace could have been taken down a touch for more dramatic impact.

Beulah – You have a central role in the story, both as an organiser of the hospitality and also in your care of Hannah. I was utterly convinced by your empathy and physicality of your performance.

Janice – I liked the apprehensive way that you played the reporter and your physical movements worked perfectly with this role. Just be careful that your dialogue doesn't get too rushed in your efforts to appear uncomfortable in your role.

Bonnie – this is a really nice role as you are the one who cares for the animals and we recognised your passion. I heard every word of your important dialogue. Well done.

Beverley – you have a central role in the story as the pilot who made it to American Airlines despite all the challenges and your big song Me And The Sky is the climax of that. I wished that you were better supported in terms of the pace of that number by the band who seemed to be galloping through it and sometimes your top notes felt a bit strained and under the note. But I was totally convinced by your passion and your switch to a ditsy islander was well handled.

Nick – You can be the one player with the English accent while everyone else is struggling to master the unique mix of Newfoundland American and Irish tones. So I was glad that you hung on to that. Your physicality in this role was spot on and I enjoyed your nervous disposition and eventual increased confidence with Diane.

As a team, you are so closely woven together in the narrative and, even though there were some standout performances, these came about because of the opportunities in the story that allowed that. To be honest you all were totally immersed in your character(s) and, despite the sound issues, we mostly followed the individual stories as they unfolded.

In this show there is so much humour as well as tragedy and that ability to slip from one to the other is what makes it such a special story to tell. One minute you have the audience laughing - either from a comedic line delivered with great timing, or from simply a gesture between two characters – and the next we are so full of sorrow and sympathy for characters going through hell as the 9/11 tragedy unfolds and impacts their loved ones. It's an emotional roller coaster of a show.

Getting that balance right between an intimate scene on stage yet still involving an audience can be tricky and you mostly managed that. It is a lot for an audience to take in when they are watching for the first time, so never forget how important it is to bring your audience along with you. This show has a big overall story to tell, and a host of smaller cameo stories within it, so nurture those.

Finally, I am going to just highlight some of the company numbers and comment on them.

Welcome to the Rock

This was the first big number and the collective sound from your vocals was impressive. All your faces looking right out into the audience had impact but perhaps you could have included some bolder movements around the stage.

Air Traffic Control - 38 planes

This scene showed how important sound design and operation was. We needed to experienced the clamour and panic of all the air traffic control operators all over the world and yet hear some individual lines. You definitely achieved the clamour but sometimes the individual lines were lost.

Make Me a Channel of your Peace

This is the moment when the tide really turns in this story; when the fear and hostility turns into empathy and compassion. I would have liked it all to have been sung more gently and at a slightly more relaxed pace. Again, it would have helped if your band leader was facing performers.

On the Edge

I loved the collective anger demonstrated in this song, that hopelessness of seeing the world changed forever and not being able to do anything about it. That intensity really shone through this number.

The Party Number

This was a glorious letting go of tensions and worries as the islanders and the plane people came together to celebrate just being together and alive when others were not so fortunate. You could have let go a bit more and thrown caution to the wind.

All in all, this was a good show that was well put together and delivered the essence of the very powerful story. I could see that your audience were thoroughly enjoying themselves and your applause at the end was well deserved. I am sure that a few of the technical issues will get smoothed out as the run progresses and I hope that you will look back on it as a successful piece of theatre.

CJW

19/10/2025