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Society : Stage 1 Youth
Production : Phantom of the Opera
Date : 14th – 17th September
Venue : Desborough Suite, Maidenhead
Report by : Susan Boobyer-Pickles

[Show Report](#)

Thank you for inviting me to give a NODA review of SOY's Phantom of the Opera a show that is currently only available to youth groups to perform. While I was very happy to review the show if I'm completely honest I would have preferred to just sit there and soak up the performance. !

Now young people – I am sure you were all swamped with plaudits and applause from all your friends and family after each of the shows and that is exactly how it should be but ... a review needs to be a factual and unbiased account of the production as a whole, warts and all, otherwise what's the point; as such we can all learn from any comments or issues raised. In NODA we aim to provide a positive and useful commentary that everyone can learn from and any issues raised should be used to help you all improve going forward. So here goes....

I am making my first comments to the amazing adults without whom none of this would be possible Julian, Ursula and Maggie. I know that you put your heart and soul into these productions and I would imagine that Phantom has been a huge undertaking. All I can say is that you have all excelled this time. I know you will also say that others have helped and given up their time too and all of those people should be congratulated for supporting SOY in whatever capacity – well done to you all.

Musically Phantom is a challenge for everyone as it is very much sung all the way through with some complicated arrangements. **Neil Matthews** conducted and managed his 11 piece orchestra to great effect and with a sound and volume that complimented rather than battled against the voices. All the players sounded very accomplished. It must have been amazing to coax out the performances from everyone over the rehearsal months with the invaluable help of the amazing **Sue Beech**. I bet you were both a "little bit pleased" with the end result. I enjoyed the taped music at the beginning and the meld into the orchestra, it was a successful solution. For the audiences it was lovely to hear this great score in a live situation where there was much light and shade in the voices and also in the orchestra.

Honestly speaking I think this cast could have gone on stage in black bin liners and we would still have been blown away however, to have an array of such sumptuous costumes was the icing on the cake. They looked magnificent. While I know most of the costumes were hired, the sheer work involved to ensure everyone has the correct costume in the correct size is a big Job, not to mention the care of the costumes during a week long run. **Jean Gulrajani, Sue Watson and Ursula** should be congratulated as without a doubt to wear such amazing costumes would have had a profound and positive effect on the whole production.

Make up for the cast was well applied and looked appropriate and good under the lights. Clearly a lot of thought and time had gone into the Phantom deformity and even from my lofty seat I could see the

effect. The programme article was interesting and a huge well done to Amy Blunden for the creation of the phantom.

The same has to be said for the scenery and props. A simple staircase structure was used throughout painted in stone work which was constructed in such a way that the mirror could be incorporated for the dressing room scene and a curtained alcove for the death of Piangi scene; plus various hangings and drapes used to depict other scenes – by the way nicely painted cloth used in act 1 created by **team Kearney**. It was all very simple but very effective. I know in the plot the drop cloth falls during “These things might happen” but the action around the cloth being removed during the song really masked the comedy that Carlotta has – delaying would not have affected the story and we would have had the benefit of the full comedy at that moment. Attention was really in the props, and like the costumes, no expense was spared to create the magic within Phantom from the mirror to the Phantoms chair in the final scene. The oversized candelabra and the boat perfectly recreated the underground lair of the Phantom. I was personally quite blown away by this. If I had any niggles that set my pen scribbling in my notebook it was the 3 chairs used on stage, they just looked out of place – a bit too modern. My other niggle – the locking of the auditorium doors was done effectively simulating the opera house doors with good actions and SFX - shortly after the cast went out the same doors – small points but in the sea of perfection any imperfection sticks out!

A lot of people were needed to ensure the set and props were firstly built and secured and then in the right place at the right time. The crew all seemed to know what they were doing and really did appear like phantoms in the night in the blackouts. Congrats to all and job well done **Maggie Kearney and Kyle Watson**.

The sound and lighting was of a high standard. 2 follow spots were used to good effect; and ground mist and haze was used effectively to enhance the underground scenes and the lighting – importantly it was not overused – there really is a propensity to use haze constantly throughout shows these days and it was nice not to view the show through a misty gloom. I liked the use of the coloured back rows as they created the right amount of ambience. I did wonder how the chandelier would be handled and I liked the use of two lights raised at the sides as each side of the audience were able to feel the effect – it was a shame on the night I attended the light cue was a little late. I did also wonder if they should have come down again during the opera scene. As already mentioned the cast could be heard throughout even with the orchestra and the SFX were all appropriate and on time. Again a large team were behind these technical tasks so well done to all of you.

Phantom (Harry Simmonds) a huge part for any actor let alone for one so young. A real lesson in stagecraft with a through awareness of the set, managing props and dealing with face makeup and the mask. Harry gave a wonderfully accomplished portrayal throughout and not once did I feel that he was not living and breathing the role. I had real goose bumps when the Phantom first appeared. Harry played the role with the right amount of menace but there was a lightness and gentleness when required. The Phantom voice had a wonderfully breathy sound with light and shade in the voice and volume but still maintaining projection and clarity. Movement and action was accomplished throughout especially in “Music of the Night”. Harry was mesmerising as he drew Christine into his world and we were sympathetic to him and felt his heartbreak at the end of Act 1. Harry embraced

the darker threatening side of the Phantom in Act 2 right up to the end when he releases Christine and disappears – the magic chair worked really well.

Christine (Eve Shanu-Wilson) gave a superb performance throughout and again was totally immersed in the role. Not once did I see Eve slip out of character which is impressive considering the amount of time she was on stage. A beautiful rendition of “Think of Me” in voice, performance characteristics and presentation and she well deserved the “opera ovation” that came naturally from the audience. All songs were sung and performed with such confidence and maturity. The transition from the happy, smiling girl to the frightened and confused woman was hard to watch. Eve had multiple costumes including an on stage change which are fraught with menace but all cues were on time during this difficult scene. Eve held the stage and her use of the space was exceptional – she related to all the other characters well and a my overall impression was of a really mature and generous performance.

Raoul (Robbie Alexander) is a confident performer although in Act 1 the character seemed to be missing a sense of yearning and passion and was not presented in a strong way. Raoul is a complicated role with many different sides to portray and perhaps it was just that some of these subtleties were not brought out. In Act 2 Robbie came into his own and we saw a completely different character come to life as the love interest and the protector. Robbie sang all his songs with confidence and especially the end of Act 1 was well done. Robbie represented the older Raoul convincingly in the opening scenes. In Act 2 the noose scene was handled really well and was quite heart stopping to watch.

Monsieur Firmin (Cormac Diamond) is a wonderful role which is full of comedy and very fast paced. Cormac was perfect in this role and really brought out the character well in his dealings with the Phantom and the Diva’s in the company. Great acting, singing and characterisation throughout.

Monsieur Andre (Tom Harris) is another wonderful role that plays alongside Firmin. M Andre is a more straight character but was equally well presented. Well done in the flower ballet scene. Cormac and Tom played against each other really well and ensured the dialogue flowed - a great double act.

Madam Giry (Gemma Higley) looked amazing and her acting complimented this stern look very well. Throughout Gemma portrayed the ballet mistress and mother of Meg with conviction. Her dilemma in respect of the Phantom was well considered. Madam Giry was played with a rather good French accent but this is very hard to do and sometimes the dialogue was not quite clear. This was no distraction but maybe something to be aware of in the future.

Meg (Sammy Clarke) a lovely and sweet characterisation who cares about her friend. Sung and danced very well.

Signora Carlotta Giudicelli (Amy Blunden) looked amazingly operatic with fabulous diva mannerisms. Very well acted throughout and a good understanding and delivery of the comedy lines. Carlotta is larger than life, expressive and has some magnificent operatic vocals which Amy handled extremely well.

Signor Ubaldo Piangi (Seran Yucel) as the male opera star. Seran held his own against Carlotta which is no easy matter. Very expressive acting and can be forgiven the challenged vocals.

Amy and Seran complimented each other very well and I really enjoyed the small asides in the group scenes as Seran was one moment pushed aside by Carlotta and the next expected to support and protect her. A most successful partnership.

I would like at this stage to compliment all the players who took part in the “Letters” scenes. These scenes are absolutely key to the story as the Phantom delivers his notes as to how the theatre should put on his play and the promotion of Christine. A huge amount of the story is imparted. The melding of the voices with the Phantom’s in the narration of these letters was very well done by the actors and sound team alike. Also there is really a lot of humour in these scenes as each character defends their rights and roles. The singing which is notoriously difficult due to the different tunes overlapping each other showed the hard work at rehearsal stage – yes we might have lost balance a few times but really would any non-professional group do it better – I doubt it. These scenes were also well choreographed and all the actors knew their place on the stage and didn’t mask each other as the highlight moved from one to another.

Female Ensemble

This was quite a large group of young ladies, some of whom were dancers and some who were not. All managed the choreography well and reactions on stage were very good. When you are part of an ensemble the audience is always attracted to the oddity. So if you are required to smile and react then you all need to do it and in this production you all did – well done. The dance stance is one that is learned so if you are not a dancer then do try to emulate your colleagues and also learn the art of pointing feet as it’s the tiny things that make a difference. I have to say you all looked splendid in your dance costumes and I was really impressed that you all had individual costumes with wonderful shoes and characters in “Masquerade”. All the offstage singing and harmonies were very well done.

Male supports and Ensemble

There were several smaller support roles all of which were played well namely **Lefevre (Zac Gordon-Smith)** and **Buquet (Liam Talbot)**. I especially liked the rather taciturn Buquet stage manager character whose lines appear at important moments in the story. **James Blunden** and **Ben Lui** played other roles throughout and I would like to commend Ben for his auctioneer. Sometimes things don’t go completely to plan and all you can do is take a deep breath and move on – this you did and I can only guess it might have been a scary moment at the start of the show and from such a lofty position. Like the ladies the “Masquerade” number was a real highlight.

Thank you so much for inviting NODA to your performances – I know that Terry who saw the Friday performance and Myself, Annie (Youth Advisor) and Jacquie and her husband David (Councillor for the London Region) all were immensely impressed with the whole production and enjoyed a great evening’s entertainment.

Good luck to you all in future SOY performances, continue education and/or movement into adult groups in the area.

Susan Boobyer-Pickles

Joint NODA Representative – London Region District 14