

Society : Stage One Youth
Production : Grease
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Venue : Desborough Suite; Maidenhead
Report by : Terry Hunt

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Show Report

Along with Director Julian Fox, being of a certain age, I remember when the film of Grease was first released in the UK... oh, so many years ago! It has gone on to be embraced by everyone as a much loved, classic musical which will stand the test of time for many, many years.

The 1978 film was a sanitised version of the original stage musical, first performed in 1971...and perhaps that's one of the reasons why it's become as popular as it has. I'm not sure how many amateur groups would be as willing to take on the subjects of teenage love, pregnancy, gang rivalry, sexual exploration and class division, if they were presented in the original, aggressive and grittier context.

Grease, even in its current format, is still rather unusual. The overall **feel** of the show is that of a lightweight, upbeat, almost 'bubble gum', feel good musical, but the subjects covered can be complex, serious and even quite dark.

Whatever the reasons for its popularity...thank goodness for it, because it's given me the absolute pleasure of enjoying Stage One Youth's production of it.

Director **Julian Fox** and choreographer **Ursula Fox**, have clearly worked hard with the cast to explore the characters of the piece, building those personality characteristics which stereotypically accompany the style of that period of American 50's...in musicals at least. The energy, consistency of accents, the relationships between characters and maintaining the characteristics of movement, were simply superb! Julian and Ursula should be very proud of their achievements in this respect, as should the cast for taking on the challenge and succeeding to such an amazing degree.

If I had any point of direction to pick up on, I would say that clearly, none of the smokers in the show are really smokers! Not an entirely bad thing I suppose!

Choreography, for the most part, was not overly complex but was American 50's stylized. From what I could see on a stage that was very busy at times, everybody was proficient enough at the dance routines to throw all their confidence and energy at them, which worked brilliantly. There were some brave lifts right from the start, but at no point did anyone look out of their comfort zone. I can't not mention Born To Hand Jive, the success of which may best be judged by the spontaneous, deafening, audience reaction to it. Outstanding!

The staging of a two level composite set with projection, was sufficient to meet the needs of the show, and clearly added much needed 'wing space', providing space for the bed. I can't help but wonder why that space wasn't used for the car instead?

The addition of suitable furniture to create the bedroom, diner, etc, worked well in transporting the audience from place to place. There was a lot of black on the set, which was a bit of a double edged sword. When creating spaces such as the bedroom, the dark background helped to focus on the acting area as intended, but during some of the 'full stage' scenes, especially with the boys in black leather jackets, the surroundings could have done with a bit more colour. Overall though, it wasn't a problem.

I liked the idea of the projections to help set various locations, however the available space left on the cyc was a bit small to have much impact and I found the images could draw the eye away from the action, at times. That said, the series of images including Lucille Ball, during Beauty School Drop Out, worked well as part of a fantasy sequence.

The scene changes were conducted calmly and efficiently. Only once did I see a stage hand, centre stage, moving the bar off stage, during the action, with full lighting. On that occasion, it would have been better to use cast to move the bar, or dress the stage hand in a suitable costume, unless, of course, it was just a mistake on that performance?

The set furniture and props conveyed the right period, but even pieces which weren't perhaps quite right, didn't stand out as being wrong. I was suitably impressed when Kenickie dropped his 'lead pipe', it WAS metal..not plastic, and there was actually liquid in the bottle at the picnic.

I wasn't aware of any obvious cueing issues for the lighting, and the good use of colour, on the cyc in particular, helped 'lift' the overall ambience on stage. There appears to be limited LX facilities at the venue, which did result in a few dark patches, more evident with a full cast on stage. It was especially noticeable during Greased Lightening, on the raised level.

The sound balance between the orchestra and vocals was spot on, and the general volume was also just right. It seems odd to me that a solo ballad can often be as loud as a company number in full swing, but there were no such issues here. Occasionally, one or two characters were a touch muffled during dialogue but everyone was audible and I wasn't aware of any late cues. Well done **Brian Cox**

Credit to **AJ Gibson** and the orchestra for producing such an authentic, rich and full sounding quality to the music. There were times I felt totally enveloped by the sound of the orchestra which is all part of the magic of theatre, being transported to a place away from reality. A good orchestra is often taken for granted by those of us not musically gifted. Wrong notes/poor timing etc will raise eyebrows quickly enough, but when it's all as polished as this was, one can be guilty of forgetting that there's actually a team of unassuming, talented musicians working hard to make it happen. Hat's off to AJ, Phil, Anna, Pete, Bradly and the 2 Tim's. There were no raised eyebrows!

AJ clearly worked hard with the cast so they were able to perform company or solo numbers with great confidence, with none of that 'nervously glancing at the conductor to be cued in' which can happen with younger, or less experienced singers. Intro's to all musical numbers were smooth and seamless, with some very adept vocal harmonies throughout!

The **Wardrobe** team clearly had their work cut out, dressing such a large cast. The 50's American look is so iconic getting the look right is important which isn't always easy on a budget, but it was achieved

successfully, so well done to the team. There were some great individual outfits such as Eugene's plaid suit, and Jonny Casino's 'show' suit. Ms Lynch and Ms Franks, both looked suitably mature and school mistresses considering their real ages!

Harry Simmonds brought all the right elements to the role of Danny. Appropriately handsome, cool, youthful expression, played the faux confidence and coyness in equal measure. Harry has a great singing voice and I was extremely impressed by his excellent dancing, especially during Born To Hand Jive, with the very sassy **Charlotte Frate** as Cha-Cha. Bravo Harry!

Sandy, played by **Martha Pardoe** on this occasion, was a great match for Danny, looking good together. Well loved classics such as Summer Nights were excellently managed, and very well sung.

Martha played the 'innocent' quite convincingly and her transformation into 'Hip Chic' was suitably contrasting, with the required hint of uncertainty. Martha sang beautifully throughout and made brilliant use of her vocal strength when needed. When arguing with Danny, Sandy came across as a little too confident in speaking her mind, and could have looked a little more 'hurt', but in all, nicely played.

Reece Lambourne looked the part as Kenickie and mostly came across as the tough, brooding, emotionally guarded character he is supposed to be. There were times when Reece was utterly convincing in his role, but the next moment, he seemed to lack confidence in what he was doing and lost diction. I'm not sure if this was due to lack of rehearsal time, direction or self confidence, but whatever the reason, Reece did show he is more than capable of the role.

Robbie Alexander gave a very calm and accomplished performance as Doody. In 'Those Magic Changes' the transition from novice musician to a proficient one...in a matter of a few bars, was brilliantly done. The whole performance was fun and confident, with a lovely voice and clear vocals.

Both Robbie and **Jake Mulcahy**, as Roger, made great use of the stage during their delightful rendition of Rock 'n' Roll Party Queen.

Jake gave another excellent vocal performance in Mooning. Very strong and accomplished..and the high notes were spot on!

The kookiness of the character came across when delivering lines, but as the joker of the pack, I felt a lack of light-heartedness in his overall demeanour at times.

Sonny is that character you love one minute and want to slap, the next. **Aaron Collier** captured the spirit of Sonny perfectly. Huge amount of energy, with great reactions. The business of looking at the reflection in a pair of shoes wasn't overdone and was all the more amusing for it. A great, all round performance.

Karmela Baumgart did wonderful justice to the character of Rizzo. As one of the more complex characters, getting the subtleties of her personality right was achieved with great expressions of attitude, indifference, humour and disquiet. I was totally drawn in during 'There Are Worse Things I Could Do' and really felt Rizzo's angst!

In total contrast to Rizzo, Frenchy is perhaps the most uncomplicated character, however I was exceptionally impressed at **Gemma Higley's** portrayal of her. Frenchy is a nice, caring and thoughtful girl, with straightforward ambition. Gemma seemingly breezed her way through the entire show, keeping up the voice/accent perfectly and remained in character even when multi-tasking, such as packing away the picnic props. A very natural, top quality, performance, delightful to witness. Raining On Prom Night was well sung and managed by both Gemma and Martha.

Marty is the archetypal immature 17 year old who thinks she's got the maturity and worldly experience of a 40 year old. **Marianne James** achieved the balance well, except Marty's lack of interest in anything other than herself, or gossip, meant she did sometimes blend into the background. Bigger reactions, appropriately timed, may have made Marty stand out more. Freddy My Love sounded great, well led by Marianne with great vocal accompaniment from the other Pink Ladies. The interaction between the girls was very natural and great use was made of the set furniture and props (ie hairbrushes), but I did feel as though Marianne lost some of her character when singing. The talent is certainly there, but maybe Marianne just needs a bit more confidence in her ability.

Jan is such a nice girl she is doesn't really have the opportunity to 'shine'. As a main character, she seems to play 2nd fiddle to the other girls. **Patsy Murphy** blended in well which is a skill in itself. I did notice when, what I assume was the mic battery pack, fell out. I made a point of watching to see what Patsy did, and am pleased to report that the situation was handled as it should be. Continuing in the routine, but enlisting Marty (Marianne) to help re-place it with minimum fuss. Good stage awareness and nice performance.

Every home should have a Eugene. I simply adored him. **Cormac Diamond** was well cast, and brought so much energy, expression and conviction to the role, he was an absolute joy to watch. I found myself thinking 'Go Eugene!' when he was in the front line...albeit for a short time... during Born To Hand Jive. A sure sign that I was unconsciously rooting for 'Eugene' rather than watching a 'performer'. Very well done Cormac.

Isabelle Jones brought a huge amount of energy and optimistic enthusiasm to her character of Patty, it was irritating...but in a good way! Isabelle had great timing with line delivery, maintained the annoying nasal accent well, and displayed a good physical comedy ability. Maybe it was the buzz of the first performance, but I felt as though Isabelle did get a little carried away with too much energy on a couple of occasions in the 2nd act, that she almost looked out of control for a few moments! Keeping a tab on such things will come with experience, however it was an enjoyable, solid performance.

Niamh Shannon as Miss Lynch and **Isabel Adams** as Miss Franks should both be congratulated for portraying mature characters as convincingly as they did. Both kept the balance of their professional position and the slightly rebellious streak their characters have, whilst secretly enjoying the shenanigans.

Jonny Casino, played by **Sam Gipple**, looked suitably 50's 'Rock and Roll' but it's rather unfortunate that the characters 'moment' is during Born To Hand Jive. Sam is to be commended for making a great

job in leading the vocals, but in terms of performance, the character is sadly lost amongst the overall production. This is no one's fault, indeed, the character shouldn't be the centre of attention during the number, that's just the way it is sometimes. Credit to Sam!

Vince Fontaine is such cheesy, creep, who's so full of himself, and **Patrick Ashe** brought him to life in such a way he was a thoroughly dislikeable character. Patrick oozed the 'moves' and the smarm, dominating the scenes he was in, in the way Vince would...so well done on both counts.

Beauty School Drop Out was beautifully sung by Teen Angel **Sam MacGregor**. There was great ease in Sam's performance. It was so smooth and confident, it was the perfect performance for 'Frenchy's' fantasy. Sam did appear to sing with his eyes shut a lot of the time, which would make it more difficult for Frenchy (Gemma) to make that connection with him.

The entire cast seemed very disciplined on stage and it was very evident this was an 'Ensemble' cast. There wasn't the feeling that if you weren't a main character, you were given any less direction, or they had any less enthusiasm. Sometimes the ensemble can appear to be a bit bored or lost on stage, but there were no such issues in this production.

Christian Dela Pena Cabasa, made the most of his moment as an Angel to great effect, and why not. It was all a fantasy.

The Cheerleaders practising upstage while dialogue continued downstage was a bit distracting and could have been toned down slightly, but this this is more a matter of direction, rather than the effort being made by the girls.

In summary, Stage One Youth gave an outstanding performance of Grease, with some very accomplished and mature performances, although there were NO 'weak links'. In part, this is clearly due to the talent of the cast members, but I feel credit must equally be given to Julian, Ursula and AJ who have nurtured a disciplined, team spirited and well directed cast. Well done to everyone for all working together, with such fabulous results.

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