



Society : Putney Light Operatic Society
Production : Priscilla, Queen of the Desert -The Musical
Date : Friday 2nd June 2017
Venue : Putney Arts Theatre
Report by : Terry Hunt

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Some 'Juke Box' musicals work better than others. Priscilla, Queen Of The Desert, is one which doesn't take itself too seriously (an understatement perhaps), yet it's a show with a heart. The lyrics and book for Priscilla aren't shoe horned into place to make make up a dubious story for the show, rather it's mostly done tongue in cheek. What better song for making light of a funeral than Don't Leave Me This Way, and what's MacArthur Park really about? Who cares, its fun!

Being of a certain age, and growing up in the era from which most of the music comes, I admit to being slightly biased ...but even if it's not your first choice of music or entertainment, it would be difficult to leave after seeing a production of Priscilla, without a smile and one or two of the tunes buzzing round your head on the way home (Colour My World, in my case!)

The Friday evening audience at Putney Arts Centre were MORE than ready for a good evening of entertainment...despite being extremely hot in the auditorium.

It's perhaps not the easiest of musicals to stage effectively in terms of set, although there's plenty of scope for imaginative scene setting.

I appreciated the painted floor, as it makes a huge difference when looking down from a raked auditorium. The muddy yellow ochres worked well for a multitude of settings. An even coverage of spattering (a hot pink, mid blue and purple?) would have really brought the stage alive with vibrant colour when lit appropriately. A useful tool to help with a multi location setting.

The generally dark stage helped with the nightclub setting during the opening sequence, as did the illuminated trucks carrying the 3 Diva's. Along with the dressing table for Tic, it was a great start and felt very 'theatrical'.

Once very neatly revealed, the 'sand dunes' ground row against the cyc, and off-stage legs, helped generate the feeling of Australia's vastness, although it would have been nice to focus away from that when 'indoors'. The use of a large tyre/barrel/jerry can were the type of props which help set the scene nicely, but even a couple of free standing book flats (easily moved and set), painted as rustic wooden boards would have changed the whole feel of setting in the bar, for instance.

The Bus, - Priscilla - is fairly central to the much of the show. I'm assuming the sectional make up was helpful in terms of off stage storage, but it worked fine, and had everything needed. I perfectly understand that producing a practical bus for an amateur production is a big challenge, but perhaps it may be more cost effect and simpler in the long run, to have the bus facing head on, looking through a large 'windscreen'? This way, the driver would be facing the audience, there could be a passenger seat next to the driver, and standing space between the two. The backing and windscreen could still be glitized up, but if big enough and with the door to one side, it may do away with the need to have an inside and an outside of the bus?

The 'curtain' sequence for the show at the casino worked extremely well, and patterns painted on to the reverse sides of the legs added good colour to the finale sequence.

Credit to **Clara Cerda De Palou** and the construction team for producing workable, effective and redolent scenes. I do appreciate what a challenge it will have been.

The show ran at a good pace and quite seamlessly, with little undue fuss from the Stage Management/props team.

Richard Eliot's sound and **Sam Ohlssons** lighting were both very good when everything was going to plan, but the evening I saw the show, there appeared to be a lot of problems, or errors.

SFX was clear, interference free and the over all volume was just right. In fact when it was good, it was VERY good. However, there were a number of times the balance of vocals vs band, wasn't quite right. e.g. Most vocals for It's Raining Men were overpowered by the band, opening lines for various characters were missed; the underscore for the 'Truth or Dare' dialogue was too loud and the dialogue was completely lost when the bus was making its first appearance.

Getting all the cues correct for a very busy SFX show is a big ask when working to the technical schedule of most amateur shows. Unless there was some kind of technical hitch being dealt with on this occasion, perhaps the solution is to get know the show thoroughly before arriving at the theatre?

As balancing the vocals against the band can only be done in the theatre, it's more difficult to achieve ideal levels throughout, however, as previously mentioned, for the majority of the performance, the sound quality was excellent.

LX was colourful with a nice variation between the preset flamingo pink, the starkness of Don't Leave Me This Way, the bright warmth of the Australian outback, and the colourfulness of Follie! Delirio Vano E Questo.

General cover was very good with no obvious dark areas. So, once again, when the LX was good, it was very effective, however there were a fair few obvious LX issues throughout. eg. The Pastor/opening of Don't Leave Me This Way was in darkness for quite a while, as was Benji during True Colours (Tick also missed his spot). The 'La Traviata' section was in darkness for quite a while, and wrong states were brought up during the Casino scene (light flashing up on the cyc when the tabs were closed in front).

Given the number of technical hitches experienced, perhaps the Tech team weren't given a realistic amount of time to achieve all they needed to for a show such as Priscilla which lends itself to continuous LX and SFX cues? The cast have weeks to get their performance right, whereas LX and SFX are usually given a few hours. Simplifying things, were possible, may also work better towards maintaining consistency throughout? The fundamentals were all very good, it's the implementation where the problems seemed to occur.

It would have been quite understandable if the wardrobe department had run a mile when comparing show requirements and budget! It's like dressing a pantomime with at least 5 Dames, 3 Fairy Godmothers, a lorry load of leading ladies and numerous 'Villagers' turning up from completely different locations!

With so many costume changes, it's difficult to recall too many specifics, but well done to **Emma McFie, Jess Allsop, Hester Woodward and Della Bhujoo** and **Janet Huckle** for a valiant effort...and not forgetting the dressers who were clearly kept busy.

Of course, there are costumes which stand out such as the flip flop frock, the Australian flag outfits, the black and pink spots frock and Miss Understanding's wig, but of all the glitz and glamour delivered with spades full, it was keeping the ensemble 'themed' which stood out. Be it the pastel pink, orange and purple of Colour My World, jeans/dungarees and plaid shirts in the outback, or stereotyped tourists, the consistency here was good and it felt like care had been taken to ensure ensemble were given as

much attention as the principles. I like the use of what I assume were stocking tattoo's for some characters.

2 points I did pick up on are that I felt Adam needed a 'bigger' costume for I'm Your Venus, and Young Bernadette was undoubtedly missing a feather boa at least (and a couple of Chorus boys) for A Fine Romance, but small points for a job otherwise well done.

The choreography of **Della Bhujoo**, assisted by **Hannah McKenna-Vickerstaff** was like everything else in this show, coming at you full steam ahead...for the most part.

The Diva's were all very sassy in their movement...but then you have Miss U's 'Tina Turner' in full flow and the exuberance of the ensemble and feature dancers, all having a good time. Company dance routines were fun and energetic, however there appeared to be difficulties with timing and finish on occasions. It was particularly noticeable during Go West, the ballet section and I Will Survive. In a production such as Priscilla, you can just about get away with it because of the ethos of the show, but perhaps giving fewer routines for the less gifted dancers/ensemble would have helped tidy things up a little? Perhaps those doing less of the big routines could have been employed for such roles as the previously mentioned 'Chorus Boys' to accompany Young Bernadette?

The audience participation for Thank God I'm A Country Boy seemed to work well...however being one of those gently persuaded to join in, all I can say is that it seemed entertaining enough from where I was skipping. The umbrellas for MacArthur Park, we very well managed.

Musical Director **Steven Geraghty** certainly had his work cut out, along with **Simon Kennard** and **Craig Backway**, catapulting us through a world of disco, soul, ballads and 80's pop songs...not to mention a fairly continuous underscore, ! The recorded sections must have provided some welcome breaks, but the music was the strength of this production.

If there is a problem with the band/orchestra or vocals, it tends to be plainly evident. However, it soon became clear that this wasn't going to be an issue...and to be honest, by the time the Diva's started singing, I stopped 'noticing' the band and just enjoyed the music.

Vocals were all great, from individuals and harmonies, so well done to all.

It's a bit of a roller coaster ride for Tick (aka Anthony and Mitzi) which **Danny Willis** coped with well. Switching from a regular, slightly down beat, guy, to a fully made up Drag Queen in a matter of minutes, and then being faced with an unexpected opportunity to meet his son for the first time, Danny seemed to take the various emotions in his stride. Danny seemed to connect with 'Benji' particularly well, with some touching moments. Always On My Mind was especially well performed.

Danny had a tendency to lean forward when striding about in heels, so didn't always appear as accustomed to them as an experienced drag queen would have been.

Jean-Pierre Agius was delightfully endearing as Bernadette. Jean-Pierre presented the air of maturity and experience that Bernadette has. Although Bernadette has her fiery moments, she's someone who's been there, done it and has nothing to prove.... and is yet still a little insecure at times. With a softened voice for dialogue, Jean-Pierre managed to take the same vocal characteristics into his solo's which I very much appreciated. The developing relationship with Bob showed Bernadette's sensitivity and playfulness. Jean-Pierre's wig was particularly good as were the all his mannerisms. A very nice performance.

Drag Queen in waiting, Adam/Felicia, is the role with which you can really let your hair down, and **Jack Beedle** did just that. Adam is the kind of annoying egotist who is a bit too wrapped up in his own camp world, but can be fabulously entertaining. This is exactly as it was portrayed by Jack, who was

fully committed to the character. Jack even had good, irritating laugh. Jack made good use of the stage and gave a greatly animated performance especially while lip-syncing the aria from La Traviata...which is something of an iconic moment from the stage show and film, but it was a strong, rounded, performance.

At the other end of the spectrum, we have Bob, played solidly by **Rob Malone**. Bob stoically swaggers his way through whatever comes his way. The nature of the developing relationship with Bernadette was very naturally played and Rob showed good awareness by anticipating and allowing for the audiences reactions...primarily to his stage wife, Cynthia.

There's a limit to what can be done with Marion. She's a mother but also runs the entertainment of a casino, so it's a shame the script doesn't make a bit more of her. However, in the short time available **Jess Allsop** managed to convey a caring and kind mother, and well balanced character.

Jasper Gregory did an excellent job as Benji, being expressive, well articulated with his dialogue and I was very impressed with how well he sang Always On My Mind, with Danny. A very natural performance, with some acrobatics thrown in for good measure. Jasper must resist the temptation to smile at people he knows in the audience...albeit very briefly.

The trinity of Diva's get things off to a fabulous start and punctuate the show with their gorgeous vocals. As far as I've ever been aware, there's no real point to the Diva's other than to look stunning and add some punchy, soaring vocals to the proceedings..which was done with aplomb. Credit to **Katy Jackson, Melisa Minton-Djoumessi** and **Melissa Cox**.

There is no way to approach the character of Cynthia with any degree of subtly, so well done to **Lorna Paterson** for tackling Cynthia full on, and to great effect. Pop Muzik is another memorable scene where there are no nuances which can be glossed over. Although very amusing, I was a bit concerned at one point that with the audiences lively reaction to Cynthia, it was boarding on 'pantomime', but well done to Lorna for holding it together and reining in the performance, just enough.

Not all characters are on stage for long, but **Serge Kluit**, certainly made an impact as Miss Understanding/Tina Turner. Apart from a remarkable wig, Serge has great stage presence and his performance was executed with a committed confidence.

There were some wonderful characterizations from the ensemble in the supporting roles. In particular **Kate Chesworth** as the delightful Shirley, and **Alex Blackie** appeared to be enjoying the roles of Jimmy and Frank...although I did think Alex looked a bit too clean cut to be rough minor from Coober Pedy! **Sebastian Roughly** was kept busy as Farrah/Lars and young Bernadette. Sebastian's dialogue was well paced and clear as Farrah, and he made the most of young Bernadette, but I would like to have seen a little more made of that whole number.

Under the Direction of **Damian Sandys**, assisted by **Kate Chesworth**, the cast were clearly having a good time. The hard work on music and characterizations, not just of the leading characters, but throughout the entire cast, was clearly evident, however I would like to have seen tighter choreography. I hope attention is being paid to whatever was the reason for the LX and (to a lesser degree) SFX issues, or maybe it was just one of those nights for which we love live theatre?

The production as a whole was fast moving, colourful and sounded wonderful. With some great performances, it was a thoroughly enjoyable evening of entertainment...as was made obvious by the rowdy audience reaction. Well done PLOS

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