

The Barnfield Theatre

Exeter Musical Society

Footloose

When 'Calamity Jane' burst on the stage musical scene in 1961, eight years after it first appeared as a film starring Doris Day and Howard Keel, it was a rarity, a film musical adapted for the stage. Following the advent of sound most of the top stage Musicals had been presented on film but before 'Calamity Jane' you will have to search long and hard to find any of the top Musicals of the 1930's that found their way from the silver screen to the stage.

In recent years many more have joined these ranks, albeit often with quite a few changes to the shows en-route. '42nd Street', 'Seven Brides for Seven Brothers', 'Girl Crazy', and 'High Society' to mention just a handful. Not content with one 'Footloose' was seen twice on the silver screen, 1984, and 2011. This stage version first appeared on Broadway in-between these two films opening in October 1998 for a successful run of 709 performances. It was a further eight years before it was presented in London where it lasted only six months at the Novello theatre.

Since that production and with the advent of the highly successful 2011 remake of the original film interest in the show has blossomed. It is still very American in concept, something that was held against it when it first appeared in this country, but with its bursting energy and chances for so many young players to take centre stage it has now become a favourite with companies who have a strong youth section.

For any production to succeed it has to have that drive and energy within the ranks of the cast, and commitment from the production staff to ensure that everything goes along at the same punchy speed. Waiting to be allowed into the auditorium I was struck by the sense of pent up excitement within the audience, underlining the responsibility those involved in the production carried to deliver a vibrant show.

As if they realised this responsibility the show fired straight into a fiery opening determined to take no prisoners throughout proceedings. If this production was going to fail it would not be for any shortage of pace.

There was no question of the show losing its shape by being presented and played flat out all the time. When a quite dramatic change of mood was required early on as the action moved into church it was expertly delivered. The MD made sure that the musicians fulfilled their duties in the transition, and with the lighting team beautifully isolating Ren and his Mother dramatically the scene changed as well as it had musically.

Looking down the list of back stage teams I cannot see a set designer, or builder listed which begs the question was this scenery hired or did it all come under auspices of the Production and Stage Manager? The lack of this knowledge, which I confess I was negligent in not acquiring before I left the theatre, leaves me in a bit of quandary when it comes to discussing the visual aspects of the production.

There is no doubting the quality of the combined work of the sound and lighting team, or the way in which the stage crew carried out their duties. Sometimes however, in particularly in depicting the scene at the 'Bridge' the actual set let the teams down. This one failed to

create the right atmosphere for these so important moments that took place at this place. Remember it was here that the incident occurred that created the situation which led to the banning of dancing, and all it represented in the minds of those who had lost loved ones. Unlike other, sometimes minimally set scenes, which visually served their purpose well the 'Bridge' did not give the actors the powerful pictorial background they needed to bring out the deep emotions underlying these scenes.

That criticism apart, and indeed it may be a criticism which has its roots outside of the control of the production teams; the work of those who mounted this production was of a high standard throughout.

Just as the Director/Choreographer realised the necessity for the drama and movement in this show to reflect the energy of repressed youngsters about to explode so too the Musical Director was determined to fully exploit the drive within the score. There are of course some gentler pieces which reflect quieter more reflective moments in the story, but the overall feel has to be one of excitement and that is what he and his musicians produced. As a result soloists, groups and chorus singers all looked, and no doubt felt comfortable in their presentations.

The same can be said of those involved in dance routines and movement. None of these asked more of those taking part than they were readily capable of, so there were few frightened looks at the prospect of what was to come, or long glances towards the feet wondering like an actor who is not sure of the next line 'what comes next'.

Although I shall go into more detailed analysis of characters when discussing individual performances it is only fair at this point to praise the way in which the more serious side of this story was presented. It is sometimes forgotten that the story is based, albeit rather loosely, on a real town, Elmore City, Oklahoma, where dancing was banned for nearly one hundred years before being rescinded in 1980.

Individual Performances

Ren McCormack

During the 1950's and on into the 60's it was fashionable with films like 'Rebel Without a Cause' starring the legendary James Deane, and 'Blackboard Jungle' featuring Glen Ford and a very young Sidney Poitier to depict all rebellious young people as trouble makers. Only rarely did we see the reasons behind their rebellion illustrated to any extent. Older people, probably because for the first time in modern history, felt threatened as their authority was seriously challenged by this new vibrant generation.

This battle between fixed authority and the thrusting younger generation was to bubble on for many years until it reached the present, I hope more understanding, style of generation gap. It was into this sort of blinkered society, with their rigid belief that Ren finds himself suddenly thrust, at a time when such rigidity, still fairly common in small rural communities, had long been broached in big Cities like Chicago.

No wonder Ren felt the need to challenge so much about the way in which life was led in Bomont, and quickly earned himself the reputation of being a trouble maker. You brought this kind of young man to Bomont, and when rejected by so many in the town showed the

confusion you were entitled to feel at the violent reaction to what to you must have seemed to be the most natural of reactions.

Not quite so convincing was your attempt to show your new classmates how far behind the latest dance steps they are. The problem here lay in the fact that too many of them were allowed to show that they were equally as capable as your good self on the dance floor, and so the big contrast between you and them at the start of the number was not great enough. The build up to and actual finale to Act 1 went with a nice swing you and the Reverend Shaw leading each side of the argument with genuine belief.

The lighting effect at the start of Act 2 did not do you or those with you any favours, but this indefinite start did not throw your character off line in any way, and the 'Dancing is not a Crime' number found you in good form. This figure stayed firmly in place dramatically and vocally as the action moved under the Train Bridge helping to cement the personal relationship with Ariel.

By the end of affairs you made us feel that this rebel indeed had a cause and that his actions in pursuing his aims were fully justified.

Ethel McCormack

In many ways this is a thankless role in so much as that in a show dominated by the music she has an ammunition pouch which contains mainly dramatic bullets. She is on the back foot almost from the word go as she tries to make the move from the big city of Chicago to the 'Hick' town of Bomont palatable to her young burgeoning son.

You made a good job of creating this difficult relationship with Ren, and an even trickier one of keeping the peace between him and the straight-laced relatives you are forced, because of your financial position, to share quarters with. There was always that hint just below the surface of a woman of strong character keeping herself in check because of the circumstances she has to live in as a result of her husband decamping for pastures new. We could feel the inner battle taking part within you as the result of Ren's natural rebelliousness caused you to weigh up every single word and action.

Once this finely drawn Lady was firmly established within the local society there would be no doubt that her reactions to some of the more staid of the local residents would become far stronger, and definite.

Ariel Moore

In virtually every production of the show, both professional and non-professional, that I have seen this character has looked, as you did, a little too 'Big City' when we first meet her. This same criticism can also be applied to her three 'pals'. You cannot blame the Wardrobe team for this because they are producing characters that fit into the ideas expressed in the script. However if we follow the line adopted by Reverend Moore and the other elders of the town you have to wonder how such things as 'Hot Pants', and other sexy garments appeared so readily. The cowboy boots do not come into this category. These represent a distinct symbol of her challenge to the status quo, a symbol her Father knows about and has already accepted.

It is I know a difficult line to walk showing young ladies bursting at the seams to become young women and at the same time remembering that they are until Ren appears still very much hidebound by the strict rules and regulations upheld in the town because of the tragedy of those killed in the accident.

With that in mind it would be fair to say that from the start you were a little too feisty in your attitude, as well as your dress. Because of this we missed the blossoming of Ariel as she views the new horizons brought into focus by Ren. This did not prevent a lovely character appearing ready, willing and able to challenge the authority of her Father, and the others, whilst at the same time always wanting to become once again close and loving to the Father who has drifted away from her. In this respect you mirrored your Mother's feelings beautifully.

The relationship with Chuck fuelled by a desire to challenge your Father's views on life was nicely painted, as was the 'love hate' relationship with 'Dad'. Even better was the way in which you showed interest in the new things that Ren brought to Bomont, but were not prepared to accept every word before weighing up the consequences of such actions. There was no way that this young lady was going to drop all her friends and change her views to fit in with this newcomer's ideas on life.

Vocally you have to show your ability to work as part of a team, and this you did admirably. When the opportunity came as in the duet 'Almost Paradise' we had an even better chance to hear those tones demonstrating just how well you had taken this stylishly drawn character into the music.

Reverend Shaw Moore

According to a recent survey no one likes a 'do-gooder', and they do not come more 'do-gooderish' than the 'Rev'. So it is perhaps not surprising that for all his good intentions Shaw's actions did not appeal to many in the community, especially the younger more enquiring element in the population.

In many ways he can be likened to the many Dictators who set out to gain power with the very best of intentions only to be corrupted by the power they achieved. There was no question of personal gain or desire to dominate others for the sake of demonstrating the extent of the personal power in your hands as you get with people like Mussolini and Stalin, but as Vi so poignantly points out to you somewhere along the line in the desire to do the right thing by those so tragically killed in the accident you lost the true reason for ensuring that such an event could never happen again.

Trying to portray a man so fundamentally honest, but whose judgment is so way off beam that his actions stifle all attempts to allow life to, as it must, progress and change is no easy matter. If you make him too rigid it becomes difficult for the audience to see the goodness which underlines all your thoughts and actions. We have to always believe that there is not a selfish bone in the body of this man, his judgement may be wrong, but his motives are pure as the driven snow.

When we first met you as you came across your daughter looking far from demure I was surprised that the reaction was so muted. The response to Ren and his attempt to bring a breath of fresh air into the stale closed atmosphere set up by you and the Town Council was far better. Here was a man so blinkered in his thoughts that there was never any hope of

logically getting him to change his mind without either a revolution, or catastrophic events which forced them all to rethink the situation in which they live.

The gradual isolation in which you find yourself was dramatically well painted, but you did not take this feeling of bitter loneliness deep enough into the solo rendition of 'Heaven Help Me'. Just a short time afterwards, when the scene was moved so skilfully by the stage teams to the School Gymnasium, you returned to the number with far greater effect.

The exchange with Ren as he attempts to show you just how far you have lost touch with those you love, and with Vi as she at last sums up the courage to challenge your fixed ideals, found the character opening up into a more rounded portrayal.

Despite re reading that final sermon several times I cannot fully accept it as a fine piece of script writing, and I therefore have nothing but praise for the way in which you made these lines sound so honest and true. This speech rounded off an intelligent portrayal of a very difficult character.

Vi Moore

This was a beautifully judged portrayal of a lady who more than anyone else in the Town of Bomont understood what a tragic loss she and so many others had experienced, and come to terms with the loss in an exemplary fashion. If they but realised it Shaw, and Ariel have in Vi a truly wonderful loving wife and Mother, who have because of their failure to appreciate the extent of her personal loss left her to carry the burden of the whole family virtually alone. This thoughtful interpretation continually gave us insights into the inner feelings and motivation of both her husband and daughter.

Having given notice in the trio 'Learning to be Silent' you gave full reign to the quality of your vocal ability in 'Can You Find it in Your Heart?'

Without once deliberately attracting attention to yourself at a time when others were the main focus of a scene you nevertheless by carefully using your admirable acting skills were always contributing a great deal to every scene in which you were involved.

Rusty, Wendy Jo, Urleen

A modern version of Gilbert and Sullivan's 'Three Little Maids from School', this trio have a great deal of 'Donkey' work to do throughout the production. As a group, along with Ariel they represent the new generation in Bomont, they want to see changes, but are not prepared until Ren comes along to push their cause too hard.

You took the tale of the tragedy at the bridge into 'Holding out for a Hero' and followed this up showing good attacking spirit in 'Somebody's Eyes', and the reprise of the same number. Of the three Rusty has the best chance of creating a definite character, and thanks to 'Let's hear it for the Boy' the opportunity to take the centre stage vocally. These were opportunities that were not to be, nor were they, missed. Neither was the chance to involve Rusty in some good verbal exchanges.

Wendy Jo and Urleen who had to be contented with fewer and less 'meaty' opportunities still made sure that they presented us with a pair of finely drawn characters who were never

found wanting when it came to contributing individually, or as part of an ensemble, to scenes, and numbers.

This trio left you with the impression that even if Ren had never come to Bomont sooner or later their energy and enquiring minds would have forced a rethink of the rigid rules by which they were asked to live.

Chuck Cranston, Lyle

The local bully and his sidekick, they are, like all such people, fundamentally a pair of cowards. In a script that does not delve too deeply into the psyche of the individual personalities in Chuck we have a character who is exactly as advertised on the tin, and that is what you delivered.

The bully came to the fore early on and was shown in a way that left us in no doubt that unless checked this was a young man who had little or no gentleness in his mental makeup, would steadily sink into real cruelty.

Such a young man would need a sycophant close by to feed his ego, and assist in his bullying; in this well played Lyle he had just such a person. There was just a hint at times from Lyle that he was not completely happy with the extent of Chucks bullying tactics. The final attempted attack on Ariel, as she attempted to flee from Chuck, was not the most convincingly played of his scenes. Nor were the attempts to spread suspicion and unrest through subtle inferences. In all fairness it has to be said that the 'Iago; style dialogue supplied for this purpose was not the subtlest part of the script.

Taken overall however this pair was suitably unwholesome. They created a good third side to the emotional triangle battling within Bomont, the Rev Moore, Ren, and providing the other two sides.

Willard Hewitt, Garvin

As with the previous pair here we have a combination where one role has a multitude of chances to take centre stage, whilst the other has to be content with scraps.

Willard is a lovely character, in your hands a lovely not stupid man. I make this point because on some occasions in an attempt to gain every laugh they can out of the character, the actor playing Willard goes too far and plays him as a dumb ox of a man. In doing so the relationship with Rusty in particular does not develop naturally, you wonder what such a bright girl could possibly see in such a man.

In your hands he was diffident, lacking in confidence and self esteem, but fundamentally a nice honest true loving friend. We were all pulling for you as you fumbled your way around trying to express your true feelings for the delectable Rusty.

Whenever we picked up Willard or Garvin within a musical number they would be giving 100% percent to the presentation in a manner that befitted their wholehearted characters. These characters were always firmly in place, when the girls teased Willard beautifully about his inability to dance they did so with good humour because they knew the sort of genuine response they would get.

Musically too there was the same lovable pair on view throughout the numbers in which they were involved. Willard of course had the big opportunity with 'Mama Says' to lead the parade, and he did so in fulsome style.

Both are described as Ren's friends, and the characters they so well created fitted that description to a tee.

Betty Blast, Cowgirl Bobbi

Two fulsome characters that needed to be played with the 'choke' right out, and received that sort of presentation.

In the case of Betty it was almost a little too fulsome in view of the apparent instability of your roller skating prowess. In a production of 'The Rink', a nice rarely produced Kander and Ebb musical, they of 'Cabaret' fame, I once saw a principal all but fall into the Orchestra pit when taking a bow on roller skates. You were not that unstable, in fact you were good enough to have been kidding us all that you were a poor skater when in fact you were perfectly capable of staying upright and manoeuvring around in safety. Whatever the truth was the effect was excellent.

Secure on your own two feet, as Bobbi, you led the company in the rousing admirably staged Country and Western dance full of energy, raucous hootenanny sounds and movement.

The Chicago Trio / Cowgirl Bobbi's Dancers

With the addition of one extra dancer this merry band of performers changed from modern city dancing to good old country and western style with no bother at all. The Wardrobe team did their part to help in the transformation, as did the Choreographer who produced movement that fitted neatly into the different musical styles, and made maximum use of the talents of the dancers at the heart of the numbers.

The mention of the Wardrobe team and the Choreographer opens the way for me to say how well they helped and used the Ensemble. This spirited group who were bursting with enthusiasm throughout did as much as any members of the cast to ensure that the show looked and sounded fresh and lively from start to finish.

Backing them all the way was the Musical Director and his musicians who played the score at a high octane level that matched the singing and dancing of the performers.

Lulu and Wes Warnicker

To misquote an old saying 'with friends like these who needs enemies', 'with relations like these who needs critical neighbours', this pair were indeed a pain in the proverbial! You both made fine use of the narrow minded dialogue that came your way, showing absolutely no insight into the problems faced by Ren and his Mother. As with Coach Dunbar and his wife you are also a pair of cowards quite incapable of mounting any form of challenge to the status quo for fear of losing your place at the 'top table'. We need this pair

to be so unsympathetic in order for Ren's rebelliousness not to look like youthful petulance, and you supplied it in large quantities.

Coach Roger Dunbar and his wife Eleanor

In view of Ren's sporting potential you would have thought that Coach Dunbar would have seen past the obvious rebellion in his spirit. Like two horses wearing blinkers this pair cannot however see anything that is not placed directly in front of them, certainly they were not going to risk their position at the school in order to rehabilitate a newcomer.

For all of that these were two nicely drawn characters who if you looked past their prejudices fitted ideally into the sort of people you would expect to find as a Coach and his wife in the sort of provincial academy.

Principal of Bomont High School

Pompous is the first word that comes into your mind when you think about this one dimensionally written character. That is what you made him a pompous man full of his own importance, and a poor headmaster to boot.

You cannot visualise this man being able to look into young minds and making contact with them and the new aspirations they bring to life.

He is a boring man and the trick is to present all these negative facts without making him boring to the audience. By being incisive when you had dialogue to say, and not overplaying your hand when out of the focal part of the scene, you created and sustained a character that fitted into his place within the story very well.

Cop

The authors did not allocate this Cop many bullets with which to create his character so it was a question of painting him in quick broad brushstrokes. I am not sure how far south Bomont is located but your Cop could definitely be described as a bit of a 'red neck', a gentleman who was against anything which did not fit his, and he believed the town's ideas of what was normal.

If ever a man had his eye more on the prospective voters at the next election for Sheriff it was this one. Along with the Head Master he was defiantly a dinosaur, and as such should be quickly assigned to the local rubbish heap.

Not so your portrayal which neatly captured the essential unimaginative nature of this poor 'public servant'.

Thank you for your warm reception in what must have been a very trying and fraught time.

Gerry Parker