

Noel Gay's Me and My Girl

Exeter Musical Society

Northcott Theatre

Lupino Lane a once tremendously popular comedy actor in this country now hardly remembered except by theatre buffs, first came across the character of Bill Snibson in a comedy play with music call 'Twenty to One' which he co-produced. In the show he played a racing tout by the name of Bill Snibson and so fell in love with the character that two years after the opening in 1935 he persuaded the co-author of 'Twenty to One' to write another story this time with Douglas Ferber featuring Snibson. The resulting show with music by Noel Gay proved to be an even bigger success than 'Twenty to One', which had notched up a run of around one year, lasting on its first outing for 1,646 performances.

The love affair between Lupino Lane and 'Bill Snibson' continued virtually for the rest of his life. He played the role in a 1939 film version entitled 'The Lambeth Walk', in 1941, 45 and 49 London revivals as well as numerous provincial tours. During this time he honed a series of wonderful comic routines which Richard Armitage, the son of composer Noel Gay whose real name was Reginald Armitage, researched along with the original score before in 1985 taking the project of resurrecting 'Me and My Girl' to Actor / Comedian Stephen Fry in order to find a new script to replace the nearly fifty year old libretto which now looked very dated.

The result as we all know succeeded even Richard Armitage's wildest dreams with Robert Lindsay scoring a tremendous hit in the leading Role of Bill in the West and on Broadway. Those comedy routines, especially those connected to the scene in the library where Bill does battle with Sir John, The Duchess of Dene, and his ghostly ancestors, which had been so meticulously researched by Richard Armitage regularly bringing the house down in London and New York. It was particularly nice therefore to seem some of those routines reproduced in this production and along with them a feeling that the Director, Choreographer, Musical Director, and Cast had seeped themselves in the background of the show and were not looking to give it any modern twists which they might feel would spice up proceeding's a little. This is already a high bred of a show, one which belongs like the original to the 1930's but with the help on that new libretto, and the addition of 'Leaning on a Lamppost', and 'The Sun Has Got His Hat On', both of which were originally composed by Noel Gay for other shows, which caught the imagination of late twentieth Century theatre goers and is still highly entertaining nearly thirty years after that first West End production. The robustly played overture got proceeding away to a flying start, with the well focused concentration of lights on the 'Car' giving us something to concentrate on during those opening bars of music. These lights changed neatly to fit into the changes of mood within the overture. One minus mark to whoever was in charge of the House Lights which were slow in disparaging once he overture had started. This is where you tell me that this was a designed move meant to help settle the audience before things really got underway.

The Wardrobe team are to be congratulated on the array of hats to be found on the heads of those involved in that opening number. Although they looked perfectly in period it would have been nice to have seen a few brighter colours on view, the overall effect was a trifle subdued.

The change from the exterior of the ancestral home to the interior is a tricky one which can cause all sorts of problems. Not I hasten to add to this stage crew who with a clever change of lighting moved from 'Car' to external, an on into the house with a smooth elegance to fit the setting.

As the family began to assemble so the good work of the Wardrobe team once more became evident

You can argue that these are very predictable characters and therefore clothing them is an easy task, not so. To fit any group of people so well in character as this group were requires someone with a good eye for style and period, and in this Wardrobe team such a person or persons were to be found. The combined work of the Backstage, and Wardrobe teams ensured that pictorially this production was always on a high level.

Whoever was responsible for the stage dressings, and/or jewellery came also take a bow for adding to the well drawn period picture.

With such a sound base to work from the Director was able to keep the action flowing at a merry pace throughout, something which is essential in a show where the storyline is fundamentally lightweight. Often when a production is set buzzing along at this sort of pace more thoughtful sequences like the ones featuring 'Leaning on a Lamppost', 'Hold My Hand', and 'Once You Loose Your Heart' looked rushed. Between them the Director and Choreographer made sure that these quieter moments received as much attention as the more robust pieces of presentation.

On the subject of robust presentation there can be few better numbers to end an Act than the 'The Lambeth Walk'. On the face of it this is a number that can not miss,, to which I say 'Ha,Ha'.

On more than one occasion I have seen it turned into an undisciplined 'knees up' with no shape or substance to it. Thankfully, making splendid use of this open stage the Choreographer gave the number distinct shapes as it interestingly moved from one phase to another. Different character were introduced, took centre stage for a moment only to be replaced by another well designed picture. Nice little cameo moments were continually thrown up as with rip rousing support from the well disciplined Orchestra the number moved to its climax sending us out to the interval in the best of moods.

It is a question of how do you follow that after the excitement of 'The Lambeth Walk', and the answer is with a lively played entr'acte followed by another, albeit slightly more restrained jolly piece 'The Sun Has Got His Hat On'. Brightly staged and sung it provided a highly suitable opening for Act 2.

The 'Leaning on a Lamppost' sequence is tricky to stage combining fantasy with fact. A good double for Sally helped the situation, and with gentle choreography to fit into the mood of the song this sequence provided a lovely quiet moment after the faster moving pace of the earlier scenes in Act 2. More elegance appeared in the setting and costumes for the final scene giving us a fine last picture to take away from this production.

Individual Performances

Bill Snibson

From what I can gather Robert Lindsay whilst taking on board some of those wonderful Lupino lane routines did not try in any way to produce a copy of that great artists interpretation of the role of Bill Snibson. He argued quite rightly that this new libretto had slightly changed the format and that now a rather subtler method was required to get the best out of the role.

Your interpretation of the role was very much along the Lindsay rather than Lane path. Although you brought the sight and sound of someone born within the sound of Bow Bells there was a hint, admittedly a well hidden hint, of the hidden 'Gent' in the manner in which you moved and spoke. The partnership with Sally was quickly established as the 'Me and My Girl' number developed into a 'Tap Dance' routine. Some nice little touches in the choreography for this number, especially that cheeky ending. The change of mood that came with 'Hold My Hand' was easily accomplished.

The way in which you 'sent up' the Duchess as she attempted to teach you etiquette was delightful.

As was the coat routine with Charles which helped to cover the move to the 'Pub' scene extremely well. Back at the Hall you made the most out of that exchange with Mrs Worthington-Worthington, all the time underlining the fact that these people did not appeal to you.

Some of those well researched comedy business appeared in your handling of the cape during the scene in the library with Sally. The business with the Tiger skin rug was in the same league. In fact the whole of this library scene went well, I loved the hand coming out of the wall to place the coronet on your head.

Getting drunk on stage is always tricky because there is rarely enough time allocated to the task to make it appear to be natural. You and Sir John accomplished the task convincingly.

In some ways this whole sequence went a little too well, too well polished and needing a bit more spontaneity to bring it fully to life. That being said we are talking about 'gilding the lily' making an already well played sequence even better. There was a nice sense of pathos behind the dialogue and vocal of 'Leaning on a Lamppost', If we did not know how much you loved Sally beforehand then we certainly did after this scene. This pathos was still in place as you grew closer to 'your auntie' when telling her that you were about to give up the Earldom of Hareford. And the 'cockney sparrow' full of good common sense was equally still firmly on view as you gave Gerald such good advice on how to handle Lady Jaqueline. Those were two sides of the character which you established on your first entry and kept firmly in place throughout the evening.

Sally Smith

They don't come any better than our Sal. She may be short on education, but more than makes up for this with tremendous natural intelligence, what a good judge she is of people. It is not just jealousy she feels towards Lady Jaqueline, Sally realises long before Bill does what a natural predator that lady is and comes in all guns blazing to save her beloved. Having so convincingly shown your love in that scene you played the martyr without any sense of cloying when trying to make out that you are a great deal more uneducated than you are in the library scene with Bill, and then running away to give him a chance to better himself without you.

You played these scenes so well that we had no difficulty in accepting the new Sally at the end of the show, it was indeed no miracle but a natural progression for you to follow along the path of Eliza Doolittle. Musically you showed these attributes equally well, firstly with a nice show of feistyness in 'Take it on the Chin' and then with pathos rather than over sentimentality in 'When You Loose Your Heart', both of which were sung in fine style.

You looked equally at home in the dancing side of the role. There was a lovely ease about your dancing with Bill, sometimes full of fun, and at others conveying a more dreamy romantic quality. A natural boisterousness and love of life was present when leading the company in the legendary 'Lambeth Walk'. With you at its head the company could not but help to make this number one of pure joy, one that only the most hard hearted in the audience could fail to respond to.

Like Bill the audience quickly took your Sally to their hearts.

The Duchess of Dene

Look down the history of twentieth century theatre and you will find many prime examples of aloof high class ladies with a heart of gold. Marie Lohr who played Mrs Higgins in the 1938 film version of 'Pygmalion' being a perfect example. The trick is to create a character who frightens the natives on stage, but lets the audience into her secret softer personality.

The firm matriarch of the family was in place from the word go. Sensible turned out, right down to your excellent shoes, there was an air of no nonsense I'm in charge about your appearance and the manner in which you held yourself. If we paid close attention to Sir John's remarks about you we could also quickly understand that the stern public facade was not the whole picture when it came to the subject of the Duchess of Dene.

This image was an ideal contrast to Sally on her first appearance dressed in that cheap looking print dress. Her natural free and easy look offering a challenge to your much more controlled manufactured appearance. With her lovely winning smile also contrasting with the more severe look you were forced to adopt in order to maintain your public facade a clash of personalities was bound to take place.

Although the costumes changed, always fitting the character immaculately the face you showed to the public never wavered. It says much therefore for the judgement you showed in creating The Duchess that we could, like Sir John, still see a nicer person just below the surface. Scenes like the one where Bill 'took the mickey out of you' during his lesson on etiquette helped this cause enormously.

On the other side if the coin you warned Sally off in no uncertain a manner showing the sort of cold demanding position you could and would adopt if the family's welfare, as you saw it was threatened in any way. You exit from the library in high dudgeon with a final salvo about Sally to Bill was said with equal determination. This haughty character stayed firmly in place for the 'Song of Hareford'.

The gentler side of your nature came realistically to the fore in your dealing with Bill as you conceded defeat in your attempts to devoice him from Sally.

On more than one occasion during the show I had made notes that your appearance and demeanour put me in mind of Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth the second, and in that elegant red dress, hair topped by a tiara, with more tasteful jewellery on view the picture was complete.

Sir John Tremayne

On first sight in your 'county clothes', and brogue shoes, a credit to the Wardrobe team, Sir John could be dismissed as nothing but a 'Darling old buffer', To do so however would be to short change this man who although steeped in tradition is still a keen observer of the present day. You positively bristled with indignation at the thought of Bill becoming Earl of Hareford, but was the first to see the potential of such a happening.

From an early date you demonstrated good comedy timing with that 'Severely undernourished' line, and showed later in the piece with that immaculately timed 'Good Judge of character' line in the Leaning on a Lamppost scene, that you had not lost your touch.

You were equally good at responding to the action and dialogue of others, you were the first 'To ff' to pick up the rhythm's and excitement of the 'Lambeth Walk'. Displaying a nice line in intoxication you formed a fine team with Bill and Parchester leading to the reprise of 'The Family Solicitor' and that one chance for you to show off your vocal talents in 'Love Makes the World Go Round'.

After cowardly slinking away from the encounter with the formidable Duchess you arrived in the Pub and used some lovely sly humour with Sally to bring the story much more down to earth.

There was just enough of a serious hint in your proposal scene with the Duchess to keep it above the level of farcical humour to which it sometimes sinks. We could believe that at this so important moment your old war wound had come back to haunt you, and felt the physical as well as mental stain this put upon you. That nice bit of plotting with Charles, and what we hoped would be at last a union with the Duchess rounded off this fine portrayal.

Gerald Bolinbroke / Lady Jaqueline Carstone

Two characters written perilously near to the farce line who have to be played absolutely straight if they are not to topple over from coG medy into caricature. In plus fours and that 'silly ass' Gerald looked and sounded like a fugitive from a P.G. Wodehouse 'Bertie Wooster' novel. Gerald's vocal entry into the first verse of 'Thinking of nobody but me' was a bit tentative made to sound all the more so because of the vibrancy of Lady Jaqueline's delivery.

Lady Jaqueline left us in no doubt of her intentions regarding the future Lord Hareford, this definite playing making Gerald prevaricating look even more a weakness of character. This well played opening scene between the two of you set up the ensuing scenes where Lady Jaqueline tried to ensnare Bill, and Gerald became more and more frustrated extremity well. The business on the settee between Bill and Jaquie, and the responses of Sally and Gerald to the situation combined to make this a very satisfying part of the first act.

Following Gerald's good contribution to 'The Sun Has Got His Hat On' you are both rather reduced to reacting to rather than instigating action in act 2 . Keeping a firm hand on these by now admirably well drawn characters you brought them through safely to the final moments played, to suitable sound effects off stage, to a happy conclusion of two broadly drawn characters who never came close to becoming caricatures.

Mr Parchester

The solicitor with the fine running joke stemming from the oft used 'Family Solicitor' song. The challenge facing anyone playing this role is to ensure that he does not become a mere 'One trick pony'.

The mild mannered family solicitor is a stock figure in 1930's British plays and films of when in the hands of a fine player of farce like Robertson Hare decidedly a figure of fun. The quite 'grey' figure you first presented therefore fitted neatly into the action. He was however a little too underpowered hardly leaving an impression of any kind on that first scene. The chance to rectify this came almost at once in 'The Family Solicitor', an opportunity you readily took. Rather more use than is usual was made of other members of the cast in this number which whilst to added variance to the picture made you have to work even harder to maintain your position as the focal point of the number.

Much of your time during the rest of Act 1 is spent observing the action and /or acting a a stooge for others to deliver the more pointed lines in the dialogue. You performed these tasks in such a good unobtrusive manner that when the time came for a reprise of 'The Family Solicitor' it came as almost a shock that it was you who took centre stage..

The guarded attitude you showed when dealing with The Duchess stood you in good stead when joining Sir John and Bill in those acts of false bravado in the library leading up to the third reprise of 'The Family Solicitor'.

Apart from those moments when a little stronger presentation would have been welcomed this was an admirable portrait of the diffident Mr Parchester

Sir Jasper Tring

The way in which this character is written gives the actor concerned no option other than to play him in the broadest of ways. With his ear trumpet, and appropriately old fashioned clothes, and jokes skating perilously near in today's social climate of being non PC Sir Jasper really is a throw back to a different theatrical age.

Always looking the part you wisely did not attempt to change his function in any way, creating a loveable old buffer. A good support and feeder of lines to other characters your Sir Jasper proved to be a distinct asset to the scenes in which he was involved.

Charles

Shades of all those legendary 1930's Hollywood butlers, Arthur Treacher, Charles Coleman, Robert Greig and the rest shone through in you splendidly aloof Charles. Whenever we caught sight of you in the background that upright military bearing and impassive continuance were always firmly in place. You played the 'straight man' excellently to Bill as he scooped up so many things during your first face to face encounter. Later the business with the coat was worked to perfection, and the kitchen scene where you once again attempted to show Bill that his place was above stairs.

Few real chances came your way to demonstrate your ability to deliver a comedy line, but when one came along 'I'm a married man' in reply to a question from Sir John it scored a laughter bulls eye.

Lord Frederic and Lady Battersby

Not quite as narrowly constructed as Sir Jasper, but decidedly little room to broaden the portraits of these two minor aristocrats. If you look into the characters with any depth they come up as a rather pathetic pair, looked down on by The Duchess, and certainly having little respect from those below stairs.

Fortunately this libretto is not in the business of analysing the characters on view, and so quite legitimately you can paint them with broad brush strokes. The frailties of his Lordship were immediately on view, and stayed on place throughout. Her Ladyship was played with some gusto as an unsympathetic 'nag'.

Most importantly they were firm targets for others to aim at or respond too, and as such helped both the humerus and when required the more serious side of the plot to develop.

Major Domo / Chef / Cook / Barman / Pianist

Characters like these can either be 'Wallpaper' or 'Bricks and mortar' in a scene. In other words either passive or positive elements within the storyline. All of these belonged to the second category leaving distinctive marks upon the scenes in which they were involved. This may seem to be an easy thing to achieve. But on the contrary it is easier to just blend into the background and just be a body on stage rather than create a mini character.

The Major Domo is probably the easiest to create, providing of course that you take advantage of your few moments of glory. The Chef and Cook had few chances, but did not miss them when they came along. The Barman always looked and acted the part as did the Pianist.

Lord Damming / Lady Diss / Lord French

Like The Barman and the Pianist this trio's main raison d'être is to help to create the right atmosphere for the scene in which they are concerned to take place.

Above all else they therefore have to be look the part and always behave like rather stuffy members of the aristocracy. With the aid of the Wardrobe team you fulfilled the first requirement readily, and by never losing concentration, and reacting in a suitable way ensured that you always gave the right impression of your position in society to the audience.

The Honourable May Miles / Mrs Celia Worthington-Worthington / Lady Brighton Mrs Sophia Stainsley-Ashington

This quartet have rather better opportunities to create definite characters, and it was nice to see the actresses involved looking to make the most of these chances. There were some lovely moments of comedy linked to these ladies, particularly as they set themselves up as targets for Bill's caustic wit. Once again turned out completely in character these ladies by their bearing and demeanour never allowed you to mistake them for any one other than the 'upper class'.

Pearly King and Queen

I always think it is a pity that more is not made of this colourful pair. Dressed in those beautiful traditional costumes you can not hide anywhere in a scene, and so we can easily spot you if you are not pulling your weight in a scene or number. Showing great enthusiasm and commitment there was never any question that this pair were not giving 100% from start to finish.

Simon de Hareford / Thomas de Hareford / Richard de Hareford

That rousing 'Song of Hareford' always puts me in mind of Ivor Novello's patriotic song 'Rose of England' from his 1937 show 'Crest of a Wave'. As the Novello show opened on September 1st of that year and 'Me and My Girl' on December 16th it seems a rather doubtful that Noel Gay had indulged in a little plagiarism, or if he did he must have been a very quick composer.

No matter what the rights and wrongs of those thoughts are this is a grand number in its own right, and lustily sung by the Ancestors it deservedly was well received. I wondered about the merits of using you in 'Love makes the World go Round', but the proof of the pudding is in the eating and in the event your contribution to that number was very welcome.

Boy / Mrs Anastasia Brown / Bob Barking / Cockney Girl / Constable

Five more individual assets to the production. The Boy and Cockney Girl had to live off of scraps from the rich man's table, and made the most of those sparse rations

Bob fares a little better thanks mainly to the letter he writes to Bill pointing out the difference there now is in their status. This added a touch of pathos to the character, making the audience receive him in a sympathetic manner.

The 'posh ' Constable is a chance to create a delightful cameo character, and you did so in fine style. Mrs Anastasia Brown has many more chances and you did not let any of them slip by. The exchange with Sir John after you had indulged to use some cockney rhyming slag in 'A little bit of ear wiggling', showed this lady at her best. It was a joy to see how easily her animosity towards Sir John disappeared under the weight of a few crisp treasury notes. After that piece of wheeler dealing Bill had no chance of penetrating your defences in order to discover where Sally had disappeared to.

Guests / Servants / Farmers / Cockneys

No matter in which guise the members of this ensemble appeared they always brought with them full commitment and enthusiasm. The stately Guests had poise and elegance, the Cockneys drive and ebullience. This showed vocally as well as in the dramatic moments, 'A Weekend at Hareford' therefore sounded and looked entirely different to 'The Lambeth Walk'.

Well used by the Director and Choreographer, and well schooled by the MD this was an Ensemble that could deliver all that was asked of them without once looking or sounding ragged or undisciplined.

They also gave the impression that they were enjoying being part of the show and passed on that enjoyment to the audience.

Gerry Parker

.

/