

Carousel

Music by Richard Rodgers

Book and Lyrics by Oscar Hammerstein II

Performed by Exeter Musical Society

At The Northcott Theatre, Exeter

On Thursday 11th April 2024

Directed by Elaine Kingston

Musical Director - Jeremy Rawlings

Choreographed by Nicollette Pollard and assisted by Suzanne Marriott

Exeter Musical Society are well known for their ability to produce a show of note after *The Sound of Music* in 2023. *Carousel* is yet another triumph, from the arrival of the Carnival to the *Finale Ultimo*, and the iconic 'You'll Never Walk Alone'.

As the audience entered the auditorium the open stage is set with a lone carousel horse. The lighting is that of subdued pinks, purple and blue hues on a painted backdrop of cloud formations with cloud shaped gobos lit in blue on the stage floor. Attached to the proscenium on either side, lattice flats with signs that read 'Ice Cream' and 'Fortune Teller'. The orchestra of eleven, under the expert baton of the MD, Jeremy Rawlings begins the overture and the beautiful 'Carousel Waltz'. Billy Bigelow enters alone, cleaning the carousel horse and then stands, arrogantly, on its step. He is gently pushed off stage by Jigger. A simple yet effective start to this production and providing the audience with the feeling of an underlying tension that remains throughout.

The arrival of the Carnival in Act 1 Scene 1 was choreographed perfectly, beginning with simply six cotton mill dancers in flower patterned dresses with white aprons collecting their shawls from a rail, and small children playing under the watchful gaze of a policeman as the carnival players enter. The music builds as we meet the bearded lady, the strong woman, a juggler, a clown, towns people, carnival workers and barkers and the stage fills. The central carousel appears and the horses, each on individual trucks, are positioned below. A lit 'Hoochie Coochie' sign flies in stage right as does the 'Mullins Carousel' sign stage left. Julie sees Billy under the watchful gaze of Mrs Mullins who is jealous and tussles with her. Billy grabs Julie placing her on a horse and pushes her around the carousel showing his anger with Mullins. Slowly the crowds disperse and the music diminishes as the actors move away from the carnival to a quiet tree-lined path near the shore. The love story begins...

Julie and her friend, Carrie discuss love and Billy and Mr Snow. As the actor playing Carrie Pippetridge began to sing 'You're a Queer One, Julie Jordan' the audience know this is a euphonious voice. She sings with ease and confidence and has a beautiful tonal quality and diction. Throughout, this was a strong yet sweet and gentle comedic performance that showed the strength of friendship between herself and Julie and her love for Mr Snow.

The actor portraying Julie Jordan has a sublime voice, pure and with a gorgeous tone. Her ability to perform such a difficult score looked easy. If I loved you with Billy was perfect, performed with real emotion by such a natural actor that audience members shed tears. Just beautiful. As was 'What's the Wonderin' and 'You'll Never Walk Alone' with Nettie. Likewise, was the actor playing Billy

Bigelow, who was so impressive as an angry young man who wanted so much to be better and good. Brilliantly acted and wow, wow, wow... the soliloquy at the end of Act 1, with an unbelievable baritone to tenor range, brought cheers and huge applause from the audience. It really deserved a standing ovation! His acting was believable and the interaction with Julie and Louise was poignant and impassioned. Well done indeed.

The actor playing Enoch Snow brought such fun to the part and again was a professional portrayal. With a gorgeous singing voice and an infectious laugh, he gave real depth to the character. 'When the Children are Asleep' with Carrie was delightful as was 'Mister Snow' reprise. Sometimes this part can be too staid but not this Mr Snow, this was a refreshing and engaging performance of quality.

All of the leads in this production did not disappoint. Nettie Fowler, the matriarch of this tight-knit mill town in Maine sang 'June is Bustin' with her magnificent voice, a voice that makes the audience sit-up, take notice and cheer and clap before the song ends! Having played Mother Superior in The Sound of Music with EMS in 2023, I expected a performance of quality and it was that and more. As Billy takes his own life and Julie is distraught, Nettie sings tenderly 'You'll Never Walk Alone' with Julie and audience members around me were crying, it was so touching and showed such believable heartache from these actors.

The actors playing Mrs Mullins and Jigger Craigin were fabulous too. Mrs Mullins' jealousy for Julie was nicely sharp and spiky as it should be and then compassionate when Billy is found dying. That gentle touch on Julie's shoulder as she walks off-stage said it all. Murderous and noxious, Jigger Craigin was portrayed by this actor insidiously and that was exactly how it should be. Also, with comedic interludes with Carrie and having a very musical voice he sang well too. Along with these, were the gentleness of the Star keeper / Dr Seldon played by an actor of quality and natural stage presence, as was his Heavenly Friend, a nicely controlled characterisation. Those watching wished Julie had gone back to the cotton mill with the kindly Mr Bascome, which was sympathetically played by this actor.

Cameo roles included the policeman, the school principal, the ship's captain along with Arminy who has a lovely voice too.

The young actor playing Louise entered the auditorium and performed the most beautiful ballet as she danced her way to the stage through an impressed audience. It was striking and just magical, stunningly choreographed. A confused and angry young woman is cleverly shown in this performance and well directed by Elaine Kingston. Another young actor plays Enoch Snow Junior and is perfectly awkward when trying to speak to Louise. As are the Snow Children, these actors were involved in the production throughout. I attended the show twice to witness both performances from Team Sardine and Team Herring. Each young actor in these teams I watched carefully and at all times they were acting and singing their hearts out. Very impressive indeed. At this point I must make mention of the chaperones who do a wonderful job safe-guarding these young actors and getting them to the stage, dressed and ready.

The adult chorus were exceptional. Everyone acted off of the script at all times, every word of the huge chorus numbers could be heard, diction and harmonies precise.

Excellent work by the costume team. Understandably, with such a huge production these costumes were hired but they had to look pristine and right for the character. The skirts and blouses of the cotton workers, Billy's striped top, Jigger's flat fronted trouser, Mr Bascome's handsome jacket with velvet collar and bowler hat (loved the grown sideburns too), Julie and Carrie's lovely character

dresses and the white satin dresses with sashes and blue knickerbockers of the boys playing the Snow children. The wigs were great and of the time.

There are no weak areas in this production. The set was from Scenic Projects and looked fabulous. As I mentioned previously the beautiful carousel, the back-drop that shows the lights of the carnival in the far distance, Nettie Fowler's Spa and Julie's house trucks and the stage props of barrels, wooden boxes down to the tartan checked blanket placed on the bench. This set worked seamlessly and smoothly by the stage crew and cast and really was impressive. With such a good set the lighting had to be superb and it was. From the pinks, purples and blues in Act 1 Sc1, blossoms falling along the tree-lined path, the summer colours of June, the golden shores in Billy's Soliloquy, the balmy duskiness of the clam bake and nightfall during Billy's death, all perfectly lit.

The job of the sound operator is always difficult when trying to find the correct levels between the mic-ed actors on stage and the professional orchestra in the pit. This team had it right! At all times the actors could be heard even during underscored dialogue and the chorus singing and solo/duet numbers were never distorted.

Such attention to detail was paid by the production team. The choreographed carnival scene as mentioned before, the dancers in 'June is Bustin' and the gentle waltz of the Clambake along with the movement of the men in 'Blow High, Blow Low', performed well. I did love the gorgeous dance between Louise and the Carnival Boy, a particularly lovely piece. Nicolette Pollard assisted by Suzanne Marriott must be praised for this choreography.

Without any doubt this was expertly directed by Elaine Kingston. She has concentrated on attention to detail especially when handling the emotional believability of the piece. The vulnerability of Julie, a woman being physically and mentally abused, Billy's self-hatred and their deep, yet tragic, love story was credible and had a great effect on audiences from tears to adulation. An excellent piece of musical theatre deserving of each standing ovation it received at every performance.

Lyn Burgoyne

Noda representative (District 5, Mid and East Devon)