

Group: Bexhill Light Operatic Dramatic Society
Show: School of Rock
Writer: Book by Julian Fellowes, Lyrics by Glenn Slater
Venue: De La Warr Pavilion, Bexhill
Date: 4 August 2023
Stage Director: Gareth Brighton
Musical Director: Oscar Smith
Choreographer: Sophia Lefevre-White & Naomi Wareham

From the moment of entering the De la Warr with the buzzing ambience, warm welcome and inflatable musical instruments, with which people are encouraged to pose for a picture against a backdrop of a speaker stacks: the crackle of excitement in the air lets you know you are in for something very special. From that moment, and every subsequent moment, it builds and builds, surpassing every expectation.

The stage was set for a rock concert – bare, black and smoking. The orchestra strike up and adapt their style to every song being performed: from rock to light opera including, as the music is of course by Andrew Lloyd Webber himself, a snippet directly from ‘Phantom of the Opera’ which was such a lovely unexpected homage. The musicians are skilled and provided light or full backing as required.

As this is based on the unexpected and unique hit film, there are many scene changes. Full backdrops flew down for different scenes such as a brick wall for Dewi’s bedroom and the school background: a vast undertaking and achieved incredibly well with super smoothness. Key pieces of furniture then appeared as if by magic, moved out of view or without the audience noticing; very often large pieces of furniture such as a bed or a sofa or even big musical instruments. The transitions between scenes are practiced, tight, and super smooth. There was a gorgeous amount of detail just where it needed to be: the plant – especially when the children hide behind or in it; the booth where Dewi and Rosalie have their ‘date’ plus the Jukebox stage right. There are a variety of entrances and exits used for different scenes working really well. Sometimes cast moved aside and the furniture was set up behind them ready – utterly gorgeous.

The story is an odd one: a man impersonates his best friend to teach in a prestigious school simply to get some money to enter ‘Battle of the Bands’. He seems emotionally stuck as a teenage boy in a heavy metal phase of life and at first takes every advantage of everyone around him including the children, by not teaching them at all, but sending them for breaks so he doesn’t have to work. He then learns they can play music, and then he and everyone around him go on a journey of personal discovery and he has a massively positive impact on everyone’s lives. On the face of it this shouldn’t work as the fabulous story that it is, and what makes it work is the central character who actually shouldn’t be likable, but the way the character is performed has the audience rooting for him. There are some stories that you cannot imagine without a certain actor in the role, which means that future productions have to emulate the performance of the actor as well as the character. In this case it is hard to imagine “School of Rock” without Jack Black in the lead as Dewey Finn. What Kitson Wellard achieves in performing this role both voice and physicality is nothing short of magical and extraordinary. He was so close to Jack Black it was if he was channeling his presence on stage, but not just in the

“School of Rock” film: there were performance moments borrowed from other Jack Black films such as ‘Shallow Hal’ and even his music as the band ‘Tenacious D’ which were absolutely superb. And yet on top of that Kitson also managed to put his own stamp on it, bringing a warmth to the character which makes Dewey sympathetic right from the start. Such an incredible piece of acting which is truly rare to see on any stage, let alone in a community company, and he is barely off the stage, his energy and drive and enthusiasm holding everything together wonderfully. And if that wasn’t enough, he also has the most amazing singing voice in tone and pitch and style, and plays the guitar on stage in character. Phenomenal.

All the actors in this production were perfectly cast: each have their own characteristics and are well rounded and full. Helen Ward-Jackson as the Rosalie Mullins played the prim and proper Principal of the school beautifully, in her ultra-tight fitting suit showing her contained personality which secretly wanted to escape and let herself be the inner rock chick she was. Her moment of letting her hair down in the bar was glorious, as was her shock at being grabbed and kissed by Dewey followed by her embarrassed “thank you”. She also had an incredibly high perfectly pitched soprano voice for some of the songs which was wonderfully surprising. Danielle Taylor and Chris Eyre made a great unexpected couple of bossy and nagging Pattie Di Marco and hen pecked and bossed around Ned Schneebly who Dewey impersonated to get the job. Chris played the role of being torn between the two opposite worlds, his girlfriend and his best friend Dewey really well, and there was a brilliantly funny scene where he and Kitson as Dewey play ‘Guitar Hero’ on their game guitars with some fabulous choreography. Chris’s last very brave costume where he stands up to Danielle as Patti, plus her reaction, was both very satisfying and eye wateringly funny. Jessica Wellard as Ms Sheinkopf made every second of her presence count with her movements and mannerisms of dismissiveness to Dewey, including her use of a slight accent with good diction. Christopher Lavender looked fantastic as Theo the rock god who opened the show with “I’m Too Hot For You” which he reprised later in the ‘Battle of the Bands’ complete with actual fire sticks which he used on his arms and also tasted: a brilliant performance exaggerating and gently poking fun at live rock band shows. This opening, complete with Kitson and Dewey coming out of the orchestra pit and trying to join in and gain some limelight, set the whole musical up beautifully, so the audience knew they were in for a fabulously funny and well produced show.

The children were incredible: in their performances as their characters, with singing and tightly timed and beautiful choreography, with singing, and playing instruments as part of the show. On the night I attended, Felicity Redman as Summer taking centre stage and Hannah singing “Amazing Grace” a cappella with the voice of an angel came so suddenly out of nowhere it was a profoundly emotional moment. Hana Bolton as Katie played the bass guitar like a boss, with super stage presence. Evie Gladwell as Marcy had incredible stage presence, and the moment where Kitson as Dewey picked her up like a rag doll and walked about with her sagging in his arms while trying to persuade the venue to let them play was utterly hilarious – they both played this so well. This was one of the many moments in the show, another was the children getting out of the school past teachers which was choreographed so well, another was Peter Elliot whose hilarious voice over for battle of the bands was reminiscent of the character of ‘Number One’ in the film ‘Monsters Inc’. The children performing “If Only You Would Listen” to their parents moved many in the audience to tears, showing that despite his faults, Dewey actually

was the one in their lives who listened and inspired and mentored them. I know there were two teams of girls, and from other reports by my Noda colleagues and theatre friends that attended on the alternative nights, their performances were also glittering. The two girls that shared leading roles of Summer & Tomika in the other team were Freya Jordan and Florence Wellard. No doubt all of the children in the production in both teams deserved a standing ovation, just as we gave on the night we attended. I wish I could have gone twice or more!

The direction from Gareth Brighton is faultless: every single person on the stage seemed to bring themselves to the characters and were enjoying every moment, and the overall vision was cohesive and clear. Musical Director Oscar Smith has done an incredible job with the music including a most gorgeous harmony arrangement with the children; and Choreographers Sophia Lefevre-White and Naomi Wareham have excelled in creating amazing pictures on the stage with well-rehearsed tight and modern choreography. Every single person in this show could be singled out as being brilliant and every moment on the stage could be talked about as being amazing. It's sharp, it's poignant, inspiring, heartfelt, wonderfully funny and also leaves you with a feeling of having attended a rock concert. A truly magnificent and professional standard production: exceptional in every way.

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