

42nd • Street

Reviewed by Tony Flook

Who can resist *42nd Street's* wall-to-wall hummable, toe-tapping tunes? ESOS gave it the full treatment with a production to lift the gloomiest mood at The Harlequin last week. The often-used but still fascinating opening as the curtain lifted just a few feet to reveal only the dancers' legs got the show off to a rousing start and the action was non-stop from then on.

The story of *42nd Street* is so thin as to be almost invisible – it's the music that counts; the production team of Director Helen Harries-Rees, Musical Director Susan Rowlinson and choreographer Nikki Owen had a cast with the ability to make the most of every number.

Caron Ireland epitomised the young hopeful, Peggy Sawyer. Her performance was bursting with energy from first, with *Young and Healthy* to last, when she led the company in the title number. Francis Radford, Billy Lawlor, matched her every step of the way in his dance routines but did not always show the same confidence with his singing. He and other performers were hampered at times by some uncertain sound which particularly unbalanced the duets while incidental music occasionally drowned out the spoken word.

Alastair Lindsey-Renton was an ideal choice to play Julian Marsh. His bearing and stage presence underlined his character's personality as an ambitious Broadway producer. Lydia Easton demonstrated a commanding singing voice and deft footwork as Maggie, Marsh's right hand woman. Lynda Barrett fully brought out all facets of the opinionated, fading star, Dorothy Brock, featuring strongly in *Shadow Waltz* and *You're Getting to be a Habit With Me*.

ESOS is fortunate to have such talented, experienced performers as Steve Bonnett, Frederick Harrison, Vic Ruocca and others to take on key supporting roles. It's a tribute to all the actors that they delivered some of the most trite lines in musical comedy, with conviction. Kevin Wood made a notable contribution as Oscar, the on-stage pianist. *42nd Street* would not succeed as a spectacle without its dancers. ESOS fielded an 18-strong chorus which showed skill in all its numbers, most tellingly the showcase tap routines such as the show-stopping *We're in the Money*. With the exception of some well-worn hired-in scenery, everything about the production showed its quality.



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The numerous excellent songs and the exciting routines in this show provided an uplifting experience for the audiences that were able to obtain tickets for your production at The Harlequin this week. Despite the weakness of its minimal plot concerning the circumstances that turned a chorus into a Broadway star its fast pace ensured that no one could allow their attention to wander from what was happening on stage for a single moment.

The hired set consisted mainly of flown screens and cloths supplemented on occasion with set pieces representing trains, bridges etc but all allowing plenty of space for the large company to indulge in the dance routines. As the Harlequin stage is very wide, some of the cloths appeared to be designed for smaller venues as some did not completely cover the back wall. Most of them had reminiscent of the Art Deco fashion of the 1930's, but one depicting the skyscrapers of New York was perhaps too modern for this period. Changes from one scene to the next were efficiently done with one following smoothly after another. On a couple of occasions the Director, Helen Harries-Rees focussed our attention by arranging movement in a lit area at one side of the stage thereby allowing

changes to be made elsewhere. Once, sounds of scene changing behind the front cloth could be heard in the auditorium.

Lighting was effective, soloists generally being spotlit accurately. Dropdown units depicting the signs of Broadway added to the atmosphere of the final scenes.

Costumes appeared to be suggestive of those worn in the 1930' s and were in keeping with the approximate period of the piece. The fast pace meant that a number of quick changes had to be made but none were allowed to hold up the pace of the action.

The orchestra, under Susan Rowlinson's direction played the lively score enthusiastically and generally were not overloud despite the number of musicians used. Once, it was difficult to discern dialogue being delivered whilst the orchestra was segueing beneath.

One of the main features of this show is the tap-dancing routines it contains and to encourage and train so many members of the company to achieve a high standard was a monumental task for which Nikki Owen and others that may have helped must be warmly congratulated. From the moment the main tabs were raised to reveal an those feet we knew we were in for a feast of dancing. These routines were carried out with energy and enthusiasm and only on the odd occasion did anyone seem to put a foot wrong.

All of those cast in principal roles gave good performances and they were well supported by a lively, energetic company. Although I have seen Alastair Lindsay-Renton on several productions for your Society and for others, I was particularly impressed with his portrayal of Julian Marsh in this. He had a commanding presence and acted and sang with complete assurance. As the heroine, Peggy Sawyer, Caron Ireland danced and sang extremely well but whilst she successfully projected the air of the ingénue for most of the show, I wondered whether means could have been found to make her transformation into the star in the final scenes more pronounced. That "star" quality was more apparent in the manner in which Lynda Barrett portrayed the fading, bitchy actress Dorothy. One cannot fail to be impressed by Lydia Easton for the uninhibited way in which she tackles a role whether it be Mrs. Lovett in your last production or Maggie Jones in this. She is a wholehearted actress topped a scintillating performance by some dynamic dancing in the finale.

Perhaps Francis Radford, playing Billy Lawlor, did not seem as experienced as some others in the cast. He has a slight but pleasant voice. In his first number, "Young and Healthy", he seemed more familiar with the chorus than with the verse. Vic Ruocca was completely credible as Andy Lee, as was Simon Cooksey as Mac and I was pleased to see that Fred Harrison is still able to keep up with the younger members of the company.

Of the other ladies I thoroughly enjoyed the singing and dancing of Sarah Newbury (Ann Reilly) and Melissa Redshaw (Phyllis Dale). Melissa, in particular, moved with spirit and by her facial expressions conveyed feelings and emotions even when not directly involved in the action.

This was another production for which your Society can be proud and for which congratulations should be tendered to the Production Team of Helen Harries-Rees, Susan Rowlinson and Nikki Owen and to everyone in the cast, backstage and Front of House.

My wife Jackie, and I were once again pleased to be invited and be so welcomed by Andrew and Julie Glass before the show started. We were also pleased to be given the opportunity to enjoy refreshments and to have a few words with Terry Foster, Helen Harries-Rees and Susan Rowlinson in the Interval.

Reg Humby

Regional Representative

Region 6