

Charlie Girl

The history of the post-war, pre-Lloyd Webber British musical makes generally depressing reading, save for a very few spectacular successes. There was, of course, *Salad Days*, *The Boy Friend*, *Oliver!*, and *Half A Sixpence*. But generally our appetite was for the musicals of Broadway and we were very grateful to receive them when allowed to by their American producers. And then there was *Charlie Girl*...

Opening at the Adelphi Theatre on 15th December 1965, *Charlie Girl* received somewhat luke-warm notices but was adored by the only critics that really matter; the paying ones. It ran and ran for nearly five and a half years clocking up 2202 performances by the time it closed on 27th March 1971. The show was written by Hugh and Margaret Williams with music and lyrics by John Taylor and David Heneker. Of this quartet, the only one who generally receives more than a footnote in the annals of the music theatre is David Heneker who, among other shows, also has the aforementioned *Half A Sixpence* to his credit. He has received many honours during his long and illustrious career including the MBE, several Ivor Novello awards (one for Outstanding Services to British Music in 1987). He is held with particular affection by ESOS as he attended our production of *Half A Sixpence* on his 84th birthday when we performed it in 1990.

Charlie Girl exploits the well tried formula of mixing the British aristocracy and working class and seeing (as if we didn't know) who comes out on top. We really must adore this plot because we flocked to see it between 1937-1950 (allowing for obvious interruptions) as *Me and My Girl*, and later as *Half A Sixpence* from 1963-1965. *Charlie Girl* also includes a football pools win (surely a first for the musical theatre) and a brash and arrogant American (a dead certain crowd-pleaser with British audiences).

The stars of the initial run were Anna Neagle and Joe Brown with support from Christine Holmes (Charlie), Hy Hazel and Stuart Damon (Kay and Jack Connor) and Derek Nimmo (Wainright). Anna Neagle stayed with the show, excepting holidays, for its entire run and during it, this well-loved British actress was created a Dame of the British Empire. On the day the announcement was made, the cast surprised her by borrowing the band parts of *South Pacific* (then playing at the Prince of Wales Theatre) and singing *There is Nothing Like a Dame* to her at the end of the evening's performance. When the show closed in 1971, Neagle and Nimmo joined the successful Australian and New Zealand productions.

Joe Brown, the original Joe Studholme and archetypal cheeky cockney chappie, left the show in 1968 and had to be replaced. Not for the West End to do the obvious thing and find another cheeky cockney chappie to take over (there must have been one); he was replaced by Gerry Marsden. Cheeky and a chap he may have been, but he was also decidedly Liverpudlian. No matter, a few tweaks here and there and a new song (Liverpool – let's not be too obvious about it!) and no one will know the difference...

In 1986 a revised version was presented at London's Victoria Palace theatre. The new cheeky cockney chappie on the block was Paul Nicholas. Despite also showcasing the talents of Nicholas Parsons, Mark Wynter, Dora Bryan and Cyd Charisse (whose legs were very publicly insured by impresario Harold Fielding for over £1,000,000), the show lasted only six months.

Why is it that such a successful show should subsequently perform so badly on its second outing? Nobody will ever know and to this day, much to their chagrin, the West End and Broadway seem no more adept at predicting success. Times certainly had changed by 1986. This show that so epitomises the Swinging 60s and is probably now viewed with some affection, may not have been judged quite the same way in the mid 1980s. This was a decade of comparative austerity, coming to terms with AIDS and signs of social collapse, much of which was blamed on the liberal ideas of 10 and 20 years before. It may have been too uncomfortable to have these liberal attitudes, then viewed with some suspicion, treated with such light-heartedness on stage. Perhaps the time is now right for a re-evaluation and perhaps we would now be able to accept

Charlie Girl on its own terms; a piece of 60s froth that takes itself no more seriously than the decade in which it was written.

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