



HAPPY FEAT - Pirates go Stepping Out

"Hey, kids, let's do the show right here!" said Mickey Rooney - more than once, surely - in those talented-kids-make-good Rooney/Garland vehicles of the thirties. A Chorus Line, the Rude Mechanicals; A Chorus of Disapproval ... it's a long and honoured line. So, yes, a show about doing a show. No need here for an essay on the play: seven assorted ladies, a bloke, the tap-dance teacher and the old bat on the piano. Put them together, let the chemistry work, bung in the one-liners, it's all OK on the night. You gotta show.

Or so it might seem. But it's a minefield. It's beset with hostages to fortune. We laugh at Bottom & Co, we snort at the Beggar's Opera disaster in Chorus of Disapproval, but with Stepping Out, it's "us" that we have to see making it in the end, not "them" failing to. You have to know how much you are daring to take on; to believe that you can get your dancers to the acting pitch and your actors to the dancing pitch that alone will pull this off. Sell it short, signal one iota of "it's only us" to your audience, and it's blown. That's the risk you run with this one. There's no possibility of partial success.

But director Karim Hyatt and choreographer Dominique Vitali dared. Their cast and crew all dared and - clearly - all believed. If there was one little flutter of doubt in our minds about that belief, it was little more than subliminal. It was an apprehension that, just here and there, a tad more working on the lines might have secured an even crisper pace; a sense that gesture and tic were catching our eye when less would have been more. A mere quibble.

So, did they bring it off? In spades, we're here to say - what a joyous experience. Stepping Out is not an "important" play, but it is a richly-written piece: you want to know more about these ten people from the word go. The funnies are there to draw you in, but the jokes always emerge from character - Maxine's bitchy one-liners (we loved the under-the-pier-show gag); the mesmerisingly po-faced Mrs Fraser's tears-before-bedtime take on life. We have just a few short scenes, and the quick-fire revelations as our people bounce (literally and metaphorically) off each other in class, to learn not only about them but also about many others in their lives (this play is actually full of blokes!). Deftly written and deftly played, this leaves us more primed than we could possibly have suspected for the tear-jerkers when they come - Lynne's first lost patient; Mavis's unwanted pregnancy; Andy's victimhood; Vera's suburban paradise lost. All this - not forgetting the kinetically-challenged Dorothy (the "echo"); hard-nut, soft-centred plumpious Sylvia and sublimely-floating Rose, with a voice made to dispense the wisdom of the ages. Mavis - Allison Kingsbury - once more, for her drive, presence and equalness to a big job, gutsily done, and the bravura, bravery and beauty of Mavis's dance for what might have been. And not least poor, repressed Geoffrey, finally allowed to junk the glasses and Clark Kent his way, square-jawed and Clooney-teethed, on to the stage.

And what a stage. Yes, many of us were primed to expect good things of the "show" when it finally happened - and

yes, for reasons aforesaid, it had to be good - but were we really ready for this treat? I don't think so. We were delighted, astonished, moved and proud.

They were going to get there, all right - of course they were. The dress rehearsal was bad but not appalling - the blue sequin numbers were really very nice, costume ladies, thank you. But when they kicked in with the top hats, tuxes, iridescent vests, the full fig, boy did they have us on board. If you dare, if you believe, then on you go to dress and dance to kill. We know; we were there.

The set? What set? Oh, yes, of course. Right from the first opening of that so-right big blue door we knew just where we were. Not what we were looking at - where we were. Hats-off to director, designer and set people for that one. Pulled us right in. And how satisfying to have the whole thing played, accordingly, in real space. Pretty scary for first-time actors. But who could tell which ones they were? Not us.

The Bearnes

[The small print. The Gasperich Hall and its splendid host André continue to nurture us. It's informal, and that's often good. But there's a price. The jumbo jets you have to live with. Likewise the noises-off remonstrations in Luxembourgish. The spell-breaking crash of breaking glass not. Appeals don't work; the perpetrators' mortification after the event is no help. Please: either ban drinks from the stalls or - why not? - just supply them in styropor cups.]