

Somerset Fellowship of Drama - The David Beach Competition: Saturday 21st April 2018

'When life gives you lemons, make lemonade' as the saying goes. Well, my life gave me lemons in the early hours of the morning with a sad event so Saturday was a little 'flat' to say the least. Perhaps a trip to Strode for a spot of Musical Theatre would be my 'lemonade'. Was I looking for a profound theatrical experience, pushing the boundaries of the genre, packed with heartfelt songs, angst and emotion? Well, very luckily in this case: no. Barry Manilow's collaboration with Bruce Sussman and Jack Feldman is no Les Mis but for me, on Saturday night it was just what the doctor (assuming he had a great fondness for sequins and feathers) would have ordered.

Even as books for musicals go, Copacabana is thin to the point of undernourishment. It is, essentially the physical playing of the story of Manilow's enormously successful, knowingly cheesy hit song of the same name. The show started life as a TV special in 1985, developing through the nineties into a full-scale musical, becoming available to the amateur stage only quite recently.

Directors Laura Grace and Will Taylor, along with fellow creatives MD Luke Holman and Choreographer Sarah Neale had clearly made a decision to 'go for it' with their production. It worked. Both literally and figuratively it sparkled: more sequins, feathers and rhinestones than a convention of drag queens could boast; big, sharp, spectacular dance routines with more long-legged, high-heeled glamour than the Rio Carnival; terrific singing and a great band all combined with a huge sense of fun. Frothy, camp and cheesy? Yes, but proudly and quite magnificently so.

The music, other than the eponymous title track was written specifically for the show and features a pleasant smorgasbord of styles from bolero to Latin to matinee-idol love songs. There is often a sense, when listening to most of the tunes that they are reminiscent of other musicals but this spoils nothing as style splendidly overrides content at the Copa. The orchestra, cleverly located on stage were very good indeed. Musical Director Luke Holman knows his business and the sound was tight, balanced and perfectly timed. Some great brass and punchy percussion, balanced by sensitive keyboard work supported the onstage work with appropriate pizzazz.

Performances were great to watch: James Newton as songwriter Stephen/Tony, showed off his lovely singing voice and Jess Russell as his wife/inamorata Samantha/Lola did the same, in combination with her trademark comic acting skills to give us a very watchable leading pair. Matt Turner's Dad/Sam was funny and Elspeth Salmon went nicely OTT as Gladys/Mom. Matt Maisey's panto-villainesque Rico and Anna Gifford, his energetic, though aging Conchita (the role – never the actress, of course) were great fun too. All of the principals had an effortless quality to their performances, meaning that the slick, sharp pace Laura Grace and Will's direction had imparted on the show maintained a great energy throughout.

It was impossible to miss the dance element of this show. Sarah Neale's routines showed the result of a great deal of work. Synchronisation was impressive as was the artistry of many of the dancers. I recognised several as Southwest School of Dance alumni and their quality certainly showed. Though the rest of the cast all delivered some striking hoofing.

The technical side of this production added enormously to the glamour and spectacle enjoyed by the audience: Chris Sealy showing his considerable expertise as a lighting designer; Joe Rockett and his team from Bright* delivering their usual, high quality work in sound and set construction but it was Will and Laura Grace's amazing Videography and Animation, projected onto the backdrop and proscenium arch which lifted the visual impact into the stratosphere. Animated sequences, perfectly synchronised with the onstage action served to set scenes with great effect and to support and enhance the 'moment'. Very impressive indeed.

I had a great evening watching Copacabana. On reflection it is, for me a bit like Barry Manilow's hit records: not cool, not obviously sophisticated or challenging but they remain something of a guilty pleasure. This production threw all of their very many talents at the show, I thought I saw a kitchen sink fly through the air at one point, and it really worked. Would I relish

watching Copacabana again? Well no, not much but I would cheerfully sign-up to watching this cast and production team delivering absolutely anything at all. And they made my lemonade.

Thanks for inviting me

Ian Hurdman