NORTH ESSEX THEATRE GUILD

Showcase Festival 2024-25

Group: Colchester Operatic Society

Production: The Little Mermaid

Venue: Mercury Theatre, Colchester

ADJUDICATION DATE: Saturday matinee, Feb 1st, 2025

Adjudicator: Liz Mullen, accompanied by Jane Fisher (other adjudicators have also seen this show).

INTRODUCTION:

It is hard to describe how totally "complete" this production was. To be fair, we have to remind ourselves that most groups don't have access to such spellbinding back-projected video scenes etc, nor to professional quality light and sound facilities/providers of a major theatre.

However…for these assets to be used in the first place, the director's vision and imagination needs to able to conjure up the possibilities, alongside getting a good cast in place and ensuring loads of rehearsal time.

FRONT OF HOUSE:

Mercury efficiency plus COS welcoming smiles did the job well. As expected, the large glossy programme was colourful, and informative.

SETTING & PROPS:

The sets obviously owed a lot to the fabulous Design and AV/Projections masterminded by Chris Clay of Lamp Light Projection.

But we also had underwater rocks, Ariel's little rockpool, the delightful small boat for Ariel and Eric, and Triton's shell-shaped throne, not forgetting the storm-tossed ship at the beginning. There was plenty of added wizardry from the light-up props credited to Robert Pleasant, such

as the King's wonderful trident. The tiny suspended jellyfish and the streams of bubbles for Under The Sea, were hugely enjoyed, especially by the youngsters in the audience.

All the props conjured up a believable and vividly-colourful fantasy world, and the confident, fearless "flying" was a real achievement.

LIGHT & SOUND:

Back to the AV/Projections: These constantly moving scenes were gob-smacking – a good investment for the show. The court under the sea really was a magical world, but we also had unfolding vistas from ballrooms to the beach. All this effort created an exciting Disney-like production to support the many performing talents on stage.

The lighting on Ursula, the sinister octopus, was a fluctuating palette of pink and purple – later increasingly dark as her life ebbed away. The little boat scene was made gloriously magical, with romantic lighting and fireflies.

Another lovely detail - the footlights were traditional and scallop-shaped.

The sound and rhythm of crashing waves set the scene before the show even started, and soon led into a storm at sea. We got thunder, lightning – the lot.

Individual mics worked perfectly, which can so often NOT be the case.

COSTUME & MAKE-UP:

Glorious and often amusing costumes, apparently from a few sources, but including, notably, the society's own Melanie Bird.

The Mermaid Sisters (including Ariel) wore a sparkling array of sleekly fitting dresses(with tail fins at the back (we soon accepted and ignored their actual feet!). In fact, seeing Ariel's wobbly human legs and feet on shore looked as strange to us as they did to her! The girls' colourful wigs were gorgeous too.

Their royal father looked amazing in his grey wig, headdress, breastplate and glittering robes. Not forgetting that trident.

The Georgian costumes of the human males looked just right, the gulls' feathers and feet were adorable, and the crab costume was a big hit.

Ursula's tentacles and movements were sinuously believable. Credit for that goes to the previously-noted moody lighting, combined with the wonderful "War Horse" style puppetry of cast members, dressed head to toe in black. They did a very good job with a memorable costume, containing a memorable performer!

MUSIC & MOVEMENT:

Under the leadership of Neil Somerville, who had taught the songs and – on the night - conducted the singers over the classic soundtrack, this really set a professional standard, with the quality of singing, including harmonies, being very high.

The songs throughout were well known to many, especially Under The Sea, but all were performed with feeling. Ursula's "Poor Unfortunate Souls" was powerfully effective at the culmination of both acts. My colleague Jane understandably also underlined the "If Only" quartet, with Ariel, Eric, Sebastian and Triton.

The lively onboard dance routine from the sailors (a real touch of the Hornpipe) got the action off to a strong start – and we were very impressed by the tap-dancing seagulls on the beach!

PERFORMANCES:

ARIEL (Amrit Sihra): Amrit was the perfect Ariel. She looked lovely, spoke and moved well, sang beautifully and acted her songs, putting real poignancy into her numbers.

As for the flying – what can we say? Amrit was fearless and elegant in her upward swimming strokes. We could only gasp in admiration.

MERMAID SISTERS: (Alice Stockley, Caroline Salmon, Chloe Rivers, Jade Groves, Lilly De Frates, Natasha Gadenne): All lovely, with their individual characters. A very good ensemble – the girls worked together really well and harmonised beautifully.

KING TRITON (Wayne Setford): Great authority, tall and majestic, but his powerful performance also had light and shade. A very touching man-to-man ending with Grimsby.

GRIMSBY (Andrew Hodgson): A good role for Andrew…an upright (yet not totally uptight!) outwardly pompous character, occasionally perplexed by events, but conscious of his responsibilities. A strong delivery of lines, sung or spoken, and a poignant ending with Triton.

PRINCE ERIC (Tom Pleasant): Tom really fitted the bill. Good actor, tall, dark, handsome, sincere, romantic, very good singing voice. A real pleasure to watch and hear! What more can we say?

FLOUNDER (Olivia Baker/Ellie-Marie Chapman). Played by a child, the role was alternated. Olivia played Flounder on our visit. She moved effortlessly in and out on her wheelie heels which made her movements different from anyone else's. She was cute and confident.

A fellow adjudicator reports that Ellie-Marie's Flounder was also a smooth mover on wheels! Only one brief bit of advice… about being sure in future to deliver her lines even more distinctly so that grannies and tinies won't miss a thing. But Ellie-Marie put believable emphasis on Flounder's hopeless crush on Ariel – bringing a Buttons & Cinderella comparison. Well done to both girls for doing so well in a big theatre.

SCUTTLE (Holly Pleasant): Despite having a character name more suited to the crab, we quickly bonded with this amusing and helpful gull, whose personality was much more pleasant than the real thing . Great costume, complete with a fluffy head, ideal for an occasional thoughtful tousling. A confident performance, with great moves.

SEBASTIAN (Leanne Barber) We loved Leanne's strong character as the supportive crab. Orange of face, body and claws (the latter always held aloft) she had perfected a rapid sideways gait which caused many ripples of amusement.

URSULA (Becki Lee): An alarming and creepy baddie, with her undulating tentacles. Ursula wrung every ounce of evil out of Poor Unfortunate Souls.

CHEF LOUIS (Emma Theedom): One comedy scene, but Emma made it count. Crazy French accent. A very funny OTT performance, showing Emma's comedy skills.

FLOTSAM & JETSAM (Sarah White and Keith Hammond): What an enjoyably creepy duo! Good teamwork. Oozing insincerity and sickening sycophancy at every turn, Sarah and Keith were wonderfully disgusting variation on the “broker’s men” of the panto world – in this case, mainly sucking up to Ursula.

ENSEMBLE:

So many talented people in this huge enterprise…every ensemble member earned praise. With so many different roles and costume changes – coming on in different groups as different characters – we were very impressed.

Acting and singing were top-rate in the whole cast.

DIRECTION:

Adam Woodhouse and his assistant director, Laura Hicks, must feel justly proud of this production. The pulling together of so many crucial elements must have been a massive job,

We both agreed that the standard of this show was so high that it could easily have been a fully professional production.

As I said earlier, most groups cannot aspire to quite these dizzy heights in terms of facilities, but that shouldn’t take away any credit from them, nor from COS. We appreciate the stage/production team’s hard work and skill in keeping all these marvels happening at the right moments, not forgetting the flying.

Very well done - and thank you for a jaw-dropping experience.

Kind regards,

Liz Mullen, with Jane Fisher