

**ROSE BOWL ADJUDICATION**

Name of Company: **BRISTOL MUSICAL YOUTH PRODUCTIONS**

Name of Production: ‘**BARNUM’**

Venue: Redgrave Theatre, Clifton

Date: Tuesday 20th March 2018

Adjudicator: Caroline Joy

BMYP entertained us with a colourful and dynamic production of *Barnum* at the Redgrave Theatre on Tuesday evening. For a youth theatre company, *Barnum* appears a daunting production, especially the range of different skills required, from acrobatics, tumbling, acro balance, and juggling to the vocal range, dance skills and technical ability, especially required from each of the lead roles. BMYP however rose to the challenge and pulled the entire show off with incredible sangfroid.

The set design by Vicki Klein and Jane Bikaros was the product of inspired use of the stage resources and a hardworking cast and crew. We walked into the Big Top with all its colours, lights, shapes, and Victorian circus posters adorning the stage flats giving the sense of magic, fun and wonder of a real circus from a bygone era. Although we didn’t have aerial performances on poles and silks (‘Health and Safety’ one imagines) the jugglers, gymnasts and clowns filled the stage, immediately getting us in the mood for the captivating interaction that was to follow. The use of the coins or discs was inspired and with the blocks became many objects utilised by the performers. There was a sense of real interaction between performers and the set. The truck rotating to reveal the elephant’s legs behind the circus advertisements was very clever.

The scene changing was slick and kept to a minimum as the cast and crew moved the set and props to various locations. All lighting and sound cues appeared well prompted.

The lighting plot was cleverly designed, creating the believable interior of the Big Top, with the use of traditional string lights, LED lights, excellent use of spotlights, footlights, flood panels and gobos. The lighting also emphasised the changing moods and atmosphere as the story unfolded. The use of spotlights on the cast against the blackout of the rest of the stage left a striking final image.

The orchestra was placed upstage centre with the action playing out downstage, engaging the audience in true circus-style, interacting well with us and their fellow performers. This youth cast made full use of breaking the fourth wall.

Sets, props and costumes hair and makeup all provided by members, friends and family were very appropriate and well managed, without taking over from the acting. The Victorian period costumes along with the mermaids, and other ‘spectacles’ were a delight to behold. The rainbow colours, stars and stripes, various materials of netting, satin, feathers, pom poms and lace contrasted well with the monochrome black and white garments. The attention to detail on all the costumes was exquisite.

Director and Choreographer, Vicki Klein, assisted by drama coach, Chris Parslow, directed the story of *Barnum*'s profession and marriage with clarity and skill. The actors were secure with their dialogue enabling the action to flow and lines to be delivered with spontaneity. Considered direction had obviously gone in to each number the cast were involved in. ‘One Brick at a Time’ (cleverly played like a party game) and ‘Join the Circus’ in the final act was a perfect demonstration of just how well trained, skilled, and talented every member of this cast was. I was most impressed by the focus, zest, and discipline of this young troupe. The characterisations were outstanding, and all dialogue and songs well researched, projected, and audible with good accents. Every character possessed was motivated with confident body language, movement and a secure knowledge of their objectives and stage business.

The two acts were skilfully directed contrasting the frenetic pace of the first half with the more serious tones of the second. The poignant moment was lost a little during the reprise of ‘Colours of My Life’, with the passing of Charity suggested by a subdued chorus of jugglers, due to one of the jugglers dropping the balls a few times which resulted in giggles from the audience. These things happen of course as it is live theatre, however it was a shame to lose this moment.

The well-drilled ensemble choreography was slick, synchronised, clever and imaginative, continuously uniting movement and circus skills to full show stopping effect. The circular choreography and the parades through the auditorium helped to expand the illusion. The colour and vibrancy of numbers such as ‘Come Follow the Band’, contrasted beautifully with the mesmerising ‘Black and White’, which certainly made an impact after all that colour.

In fact, the choreography was of one of the highest quality I have seen in a youth amateur production in a long time and gave the impression of a much larger cast.

The cast recovered well from a few near misses as rather tricky acro balance sequences were performed. The handstand to shoulder sit came at Toby Brewer with lightning speed and slightly off position, but wow did that young man make sure the sequence ended well and carried on like an expert!

Musical Conductor, Joe Church and the orchestra (Ben Wiles, Anneka Sutcliffe, Mark Whitlam) ensured they equalled the cast in talent and skill, with supportive sensitive playing, good balance and excellent timing. The overture transitioned well from rousing to lyrical and the underscoring was well modulated. The young voices delivered the complex score with intention, a connection to the lyrics and maturity. ‘There’s a Sucker Born Every Minute’, ‘One Brick at a Time’, ‘Join the Circus’ to ‘Love Makes Such Fools of Us All’ and the beautiful harmonies in ‘Black and White’, were particularly engaging moments. The orchestra added to the period ambiance. Having the orchestra at the back of the stage ensured that everyone was involved in the action.

The libretto is full of great numbers, and BMYP showed confidence and talent when delivering the complex score and made this slick show their own. Everything was well executed, exciting and inclusive. This was a youth production delivered with maturity and an abundance of talent. Everyone involved both on stage and back stage should feel very proud.

**PHINEAS TAYLOR BARNUM**

**I**n the title role of the great impresario and circus owner, Josh Jones gave a mature and animated performance to this character, with natural leadership qualities, full of energy, comic timing and with endless stamina – rarely leaving the stage and involved in most of the musical numbers – not forgetting his well-executed tight rope walk and stilt skills. The moment Josh’s P.T Barnum appeared he commanded the stage, becoming the complete embodiment of the character. He had a sound understanding of Barnum's showmanship, his knack of scamming the public, a realistic relationship with his wife and an excellent singing voice. He also delivered the difficult patter songs and vaudeville style musical numbers, with apparent ease and a great deal of flair.
**CHARITY BARNUM (CHAIRY)**

Tasha Tomlinson gave a nuanced performance of Barnum’s disapproving and serious yet affectionate and loyal wife, handling the character’s complex change of emotions effortlessly. Tasha’s singing was confidently performed, and her dialogue was expertly delivered with the correct modulation. ‘Colours of My Life’ was sung with pathos. There

was a lovely rapport between the two leads, both at once touching and humourous as they bickered their way through the up and downs of married life.
**RINGMASTER and JAMES A BAILEY**

Jack Courtiour and Toby Brewer (also Concertmaster) gave energetic performances linking the story of Barnum throughout the production. Both possessed fine acting, dancing and singing skills, helping to sustain the magic and belief that we are inside Barnum’s circus tent. Toby also possessed a fantastic jazz voice.

**JOICE HETH**

Ruby Loftus played “the oldest woman alive”, giving a very believable and humourous cameo performance, proving she could easily embody the role of a woman at least a century her senior! Ruby brought great physical and vocal comedy to the dance routine of her song ‘Thank God I’m Old.’

**TOM THUMB**

Isaac Lewis brought huge charm and personality to the small role. His shining performance of ‘Bigger isn’t Better’ together with the oversized chair and the impressive elephant legs & trunk, brought about the illusion of his stature and a great audience response. Also impressive was Isaac’s voice, movement, a scene stealing tap routine and endless stamina.

**JENNY LIND**

Tess Allison-Scammell looked stunning and gave a lyrical performance as the stylish Jenny Lind – the Swedish nightingale – and her soprano voice did justice to her title. Tess also successfully sustained a Scandinavian accent throughout and possessed good comic timing in her exchanges with Barnum.

**BLUES SINGERS**

 Isla Moody and Eddie Groves’ rendition of Black and White revealed some impressive smoky vocals for this the jazz/blues number, changing the previous frantic energy of the previous scenes. As a duet this number worked well and your voices complemented each other. Eddie Groves also showed his acting versatility as Julius Goldschmidt and Chester Lyman.

The supporting cast of Craig Bidwell (**Amos Scudder**), Josh Fudge (**Sherwood Stratton**), Ella Khanna (**Mrs Stratton**), Isla Moody (**First Woman**), Lottie Maggs (**Second Woman**) , John Gompels (**Wilton**), Clowns were expertly played by Max Brewer, Lizzie Howe, Joel Jervis, Ben Kenna, Lola Milsom, and other parts played by Theo Birakos, Emily Chaffe, India Garrett-Cox, Cara Jervis, Malachy O’ Callaghan, Guy Rudin and Kibibi White gave unbounded joy and clearly revelled in entertaining their audience.

Every single member stood out as fully realised characters, completely invested in their roles, dancing, acting, singing and moving acrobatically across the stage with energy, discipline and an understanding of stagecraft. Everyone did a fabulous job of keeping the energy levels spectacularly high as well as taking on multiroles throughout the show, showing such versatility as tumblers, jugglers, clowns, acrobats, dancers, gymnasts, strongmen, bricklayers, passers-by, museum patrons, beefeaters, bands and Bridgeport Pageant Choir! You will all come away from this production with a lot more to say about skills on your CV’s!

For me, *Barnum* echoed the discipline, magic and talent of the Golden Era of Musicals during the 1950s. Everyone came away from the show happy and full of life and you can’t ask for more than that!

*Many thanks for your kind hospitality and the delicious sweets! I hope to see you all again in the future.*