



Society : St. Albans Operatic Society
Production : Charlie & Algernon
Date : June 2000
Venue : The Maltings Theatre
Report by : Colin Self & Lennie

Report

Most musical plays tend to be frothy and light hearted. in a very few such as Blood Brothers and Man of La Mancha there is a chance for some powerful dramatic acting and this production can be put into the latter category. It gave the society a chance to show that they have talented actors as well as singers within their organisation. The subject matter of the mentally handicapped. even in this day and age, is still a difficult one for most people to handle and is to the full credit of the cast that it was handled sympathetically. Director Julian Evans can be justly proud of this production.

John Dell as Charlie was magnificent, and proved that he was as superb an actor as he is a singer. He had obviously done a great deal of studying to copy the mannerisms of the character. The hand twisting, the flat footed, open legged walk, the open mouth effective drawl. kept up when singing, convinced the audience that this was indeed a mentally handicapped person.

The slow transformation after the operation was good, the walk became less flat footed and the "Charlie and Algernon" number was very enjoyable and well appreciated by the audience. The regression back was a little too fast for my taste, the gestures being brought back into play a little later may have improved the transformation, but the scene with Alice in "I really Loved You" was perfect and I was convinced that as Alice walked off stage she was crying.

Charlotte Rhodes-Chamberlain is a very talented straight actress. She gave an excellent portrayal of Alice with all the sympathy and tenderness necessary during the first scenes and the moment when she fell in love with Charlie was beautifully played. She sang well. "Whatever Time There Is" was particularly fine but would have had more impact if it was not sung in the modern pop idiom but the notes were given their proper value.

There were very nice characterisations from Clive Webb and Ross Macinnes as the two Doctors. Clive being the more dedicated to the experiment and Ross being more sympathetic to Charlie. Their diction was excellent and they sang well with Charlie. I particularly liked the hesitation used by Clive when he answerphone was used (he obviously had an aversion to using those machines).

Jane Foster gave an excellent performance as the Bronx Jewish Mrs. Donner giving so much sympathy and tenderness to Charlie and her scene with Charlie at the end of Act 3 was particularly moving. He accent and gestures were extremely good.

Peter Barker and Stella Eastwood worked well together as Frank and Lita. "Midnight Riding" was well sung and there was a nice interaction in their scenes with Charlie. I felt that Lita could have done with a more figure hugging dress to help portray her character in this song and Frank did get himself upstage of Charlie around the bar which looked a little messy.

Congratulations to Adam McInnes for his fine performance as young Charlie, with Jane Watkinson and Nick Clark as his parents.

Overall the staging was extremely good, use of medical white coats for the stage crew was very effective and at no time was the action held up whilst props were being put on stage. I liked the use of gobos and back projection to help in some of the scenes but more definite lighting or better grouping would have been more effective in one scene where the Doctors and Charlie and the family was on stage together as it was difficult to picture Charlie in a flashback with the two doctors still lit .

Musical Director Graham Thomson maintained the high standard associated with St. Albans Operatic society. Overall the band was unobtrusive and did not overpower the singing although on the same level due to the lack of a pit.

It is such a pity that such a splendid performance as this was missed by so many of the general public. I know that there were many more attractions available on Saturday night especially in Europe but my heart went out to the cast playing to so few people, the majority of them from the operatic society, and it is to their credit that they gave such an admirable performance.

Thank you for a most entertaining and thought provoking evening