

St. Albans Operatic Society
Mack & Mabel
Arena Theatre
Friday 26th April
Lennie & Colin Self

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Mack and Mabel has never had box office success. It's original Broadway run was very short - lived and the London revival didn't last much longer, which is rather strange when it is one of Jerry Herman's finest scores. It is rare for amateur societies to attract large audiences for this show as was evident on Friday night performance, which is a pity as the cast worked their socks off to produce an entertaining show.

The very good orchestra under Peter Holt's baton got the show off to a fine start with the up - tempo overture, and only once (when the girls were singing asides to Mack Sennett during the "Hundreds of Girl's number did the underscoring overpower the cast.

Clive Webb as Mack gave a good performance keeping his accent throughout the production and his voice was well suited to the most well known song from the show "I Won't Send Roses". However I did feel that his characterisation was not forceful enough to make Sennett the overpowering personality he should have been, and he rarely changed his facial expression throughout the evening.

Katy Davies gave a very sympathetic portrayal of the doomed Mabel Normand even softening the hard Bronx accent she had in Scene 1 to a more cultured one as the show progressed as Mabel would have done when mixing with more educated people. Her excellent singing voice was prominent throughout all of her numbers and her rendition of "Time Heals Everything" was excellent. Only once during a reprise of "I Won't Send Roses did she lapse into the pop way of slurring notes which was not in vogue at the time the show was set. She could have made more of her slide into drugs and alcoholism which would have helped the audience with the plot as it was never clear whether she had eventually died at the end of the show.

I was impressed with Jo Colman's performance as Lottie Ames. She had a good accent and delivery and showed off her ability to sing and dance in "Tap Your Troubles Away" and her lively personality shone through ,

Ross MacInnes did well to tackle the part of Fatty Arbuckle, not easy under all that padding, and his strong voice was used to good effect in "When Mabel Walks in the Room" - a nice characterisation. I

As Kleiman and Fox, John Hope and David Berridge made a good duo, although it may have been better to keep them in their Scene 1 costumes throughout the whole show to distinguish them as the backers.

National Operatic and Dramatic Association

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Paul Sugden was just right as the suave sophisticated William Desmond Taylor especially when persuading Mabel to take drugs, but I was not so convinced by Steve Knight as Frank who needed more projection as often his dialogue was rushed and indistinct.

It was nice to see that St.Albans can produce a good troupe of dancers. The routine in " Tap Your Troubles Away" was excellent and overall the choreography for the chorus was simple but effective.

I must compliment the stage crew on the handling of the set and props which was done efficiently and at no time detracted from the pace of the show, even the train was moved with ease no easy feat in the middle of a scene.

The main problem with this production was the lighting. I had been made aware that there had been a problem beforehand but I did wonder what other members of the audience felt with many of the scenes being so underlit that faces could not be seen. At one point lines were delivered from stage right and left completely in shadow and by Friday night this should have been improved. Again there was not enough use of lighting contrast and freezes to distinguish between real time and flashbacks at one point Sennett was addressing the audience whilst camera - men were adjusting the camera upstage.

The production did have some nice groupings and touches and it was to Director Ann Hertler-Smiths credit that each member of the chorus had there "few minutes of fame" to the front of the stage. I particularly liked the cast being revealed from under the sheets in the opening scene, but in many of the scenes too many cast were on stage en bloc rather than wandering on to create the scene. In Scene 1 it was difficult to see that a film was being made as there were so many people around the camera area which was set too far back. I was very disappointed in the Keystone Cops routine which involved too many people doing so many things that it seemed a jumble. It may have been better to take a much smaller number and train them rigorously in a routine to give a better imitation of the original. I did like the use of the cinema screen using cast members and the credits at the end were especially effective.

The chorus reacted well to the plot and the ensemble singing was excellent, especially the sopranos who managed to reach very high notes without screeching. There was only one occasion when words could not be understood.

Overall Friday evenings performance was entertaining , with some very good "highspots" but it lacked pace in places and several people remarked that it lacked the energy of the previous evening's performance. Unfortunately the audience only see one performance . Never the less, congratulations St. Alban's on once again producing a very enjoyable show , and thank you for your hospitality.