

Guys and Dolls

Group:	Staines Musical Theatre Group (SMTG)
Production:	Guys and Dolls
Director:	Karen Hanley
Musical Director:	Jake Medler
Venue:	The Magna Carta Arts Centre, Staines-upon-Thames
Date:	Friday, 13 th March 2020

With music and lyrics by Frank Loesser and book by Jo Swerling and Abe Burrows, *Guys and Dolls* takes its subject matter from short stories by Damon Runyon. The show had its premiere on Broadway in 1950, where it ran for 1,200 performances and won the Tony Award for Best Musical. The show has enjoyed many revivals over the years; and in 1998,^[5] Vivian Blaine, Sam Levene and the original Broadway cast of the 1950 Decca cast recording, were posthumously inducted into the Grammy Hall of Fame.

A lovely welcoming atmosphere was extended to all patrons upon arrival by both the Box Office and Front of House teams. Your programme was nicely laid out, with all the relevant information included. The Magna Carta Arts Centre is very much a school and there is no denying this, however SMTG and Paul Carter along with his team do everything they can to make the most of the venue and make it feel as much of a theatrical venue as possible, with the display boards being of particular note and interest. You are very fortunate to have such a large stage available for your use, and once you are in the auditorium it is quite easy to forget you are in a scholastic setting.

The use of large, illuminated signs both overhead and up the proscenium arch was incredibly eye catching and highly effective. The addition of various different trucks and set dressings aided in setting the scene and contextualising the action, however one or two of these seemed incredibly cumbersome, which can't have been very helpful during scene changes. On that matter, as an audience member it did seem like many of the scene changes seemed to go on for an awfully long time, with many of them often not starting until sometime into the linking or incidental music. There seemed to be several opportunities where these changes could have happened without the need for any extra music, or waiting until the very end of a scene, which could have helped speed the show up a little (one must admit it is very long, with Act 1 running at over an hour and twenty minutes). Maybe this is something that could be given more consideration in the future, from both the Director and Stage management team.

Lighting was very efficient throughout, no great effects were needed, but what was used was done so well and helped create the appropriate ambiance and setting.

The men's costumes were very striking, in bright and bold block colours, with the gentleman wearing a different colour each. For the most part these fitted well, but one or two, including Sky's were ill-fitting and so unfortunately looked peculiar thus becoming slightly distracting at times. The ladies' costumes were similarly bright and eclectic, and well suited to the era, with a nice mixture of dresses, skirts and trousers to help portray the diversity of the New York population of the time. Hair and makeup were both well executed and well suited to the era.

Musical Director Jake Medler and his orchestra created an impressive sound however, as is always the issue when there is no sunken pit and a brass heavy orchestration, they were far too often overpowering and unsympathetic towards the performers.

As the houselights dimmed and the orchestra played their first few notes, you could tell that they were well accomplished and full of energy. Frank Loesser's score is beautifully big and brassy and one can't help but feel lifted by its full, bright sounds. As the overture segued into the opening sequence, the show got off to a fantastic start, full of verve and vigour, with both the cast enjoying themselves and the orchestra obviously in their element. This opening sequence had many things going on and it was clear that a lot of thought had been put into it.

As is always an issue within amateur theatre, there was a deficit of male cast members, however this was competently overcome with the swapping of gender of several characters, with a female Harry the Horse working particularly well.

The three gamblers – Benny Southstreet (Ian Thomas), Nicely Nicely Johnson (William Hann) and Rusty Charlie (Robert Franck) opened the show proper with the well-known contrapuntal number “Fugue for Tinhorns” competently executed. Ian and William bounced nicely (no pun intended!) off each other, both established differing, well-rounded characters from the start, with Ian confidently proffering a foil to the comedic simplicity of Nicely where appropriate. In the role of Nicely Nicely Johnson, Will Hann was full of energy, which he never let wain or fade, with a simple interpretation of the character, which endeared him to the audience. His rendition of “Sit Down You're Rocking the Boat” was executed with faultless vocals, it's just a shame that there was so much “business” going on by the ensemble however, as this detracted somewhat from the strong performance of the soloist.

In a role intended to be played by a male actor, Jo Hayes gave a notable performance in the role of Lt. Brannigan, the New York cop trying to prevent Nathan's crap games. Once you had adjusted to the gender swap of the character, you could appreciate that Jo brought out the comedy within the role, implementing both a comical gait and somewhat over the top acting, which did not stray to caricature. It is worth mentioning however, that her sudden appearances as one of the Hot Box Dancers was rather jarring – I am sure there were other less prominent members of the female ensemble that could have taken this role.

Sarah Brown is not the easiest of roles to play, especially not as a first foray into principal parts. To this end Emily Boneham should be pleased with her efforts. Her dialogue was delivered well and her singing pleasant, I am sure that if, moving forward, Emily pays particular attention to articulation and diction whilst singing she will continue to enjoy many leading roles in the future. Supporting Emily as her Grandfather, John Carter gave yet another commendable performance in the role of Arvide Abernathy, providing solid vocals and empathy to the character.

Nathan Detroit was played incredibly well by Wesley Wooden, who had good stage presence and conveyed with his mannerisms, facial expressions and interactions with fellow cast members, a great presence of an increasing panic in trying to organise a crap game, hide from the law and keep his relationship going. Wesley's partnership with Glenys was particularly enjoyable, with great chemistry and good comic timing between the pair.

Glenys Hann's portrayal of Miss Adelaide was first rate, effortlessly drawing out all the pathos and comedy that such a role provides. Her vocals in both her dialogue and music were brilliant throughout, maintaining the accent and affectation of the cold effortlessly. Glenys' renditions of "Adelaide's Lament" and "Sue Me" being particularly noteworthy - this was certainly a role Glenys was born to play!

In the role of the extremely charismatic Sky Masterson, Jordan Bateson had a lovely singing voice and did well to tell the story of his character. However, he did come across as somewhat lack lustre at times, maybe some greater variation in inflection and pitch might have alleviated this. Jordan has good stage presence, but I felt that he could've been stronger in showing the suave, comedic and commandeering side to his character – perhaps this was an off day for him (?).

Supporting the efforts of Sarah and Arvide, the ladies of the Mission band provided a solid backdrop to the works and attitudes of the Salvation Army, with Sue Tregoning making the most of her cameo as the Salvationist

General Cartwright. I did note however, that her costume seemed to give her an oddly triangular shape (but this is just me being picky!).

Making up the numerous supporting roles including, but not limited to Big Jule, Harry the Horse, Angie the Ox and Miss Adelaide's Hot Box Dancers, the SMTG ensemble did a first rate job, with each member ensuring their roles were fully formed and well rounded, to help provide the and hustle and bustle of New York and its' inhabitants. The Hot Box Dancers executed their dance moves well, it is a real shame however that the production didn't have a dedicated choreographer, as there was a lot more that could have been achieved, especially in terms of the Hot Box, had there been one. Karen Hanley's direction was well thought out and created many effective moments - she obviously has an abundance of interesting ideas and does a good job of translating these to the stage.

Overall, I really did enjoy this performance. The ensemble scenes were strong and there was lots of storytelling going on. The entire cast did a brilliant job carrying themselves 'within the style' of the era and they were very entertaining to watch; it was clear that a lot of work had gone into characterisation as was apparent in the performance. As I have previously mentioned, there were a few minor elements that could've enhanced this performance even more, but the audience and I very much enjoyed your production.

I would like to express my thanks to all at SMTG for inviting me to come along and critique your performance in Gloria's stead. Staines Musical Theatre Group will always be very dear to me, being the place where my career started over two decades ago!

Once again, many thanks for your warm hospitality and for providing a great evening's entertainment. I wish you every success with your forthcoming productions and look forward to seeing them.

James B. Palmer

Director of Musical Theatre
Wentworth Dance Centre