



Society : ROS Stageworks Summer School
Production : The Music Man, Junior
Date : 3rd August 2013
Venue : Winston Churchill Theatre
Report by : Tony Austin

Report

I see that when I reviewed the Stageworks' 2011 performance of Oklahoma! I began by praising the dedication of the host of adults involved with the organisation of the week-long Summer School which culminated in the performances on the final Saturday, and while not naming them (or their successors in office) I should like to echo that praise to all those people without whom the massive 2013 enterprise we saw with 46 happy and fulfilled children on stage could not have happened.

But while then I only gave a brief mention to those giving technical support to that production, this time I cannot pass up the excellence of **Alan Bailey**'s design and building of the forestage Music Man motifs and the scenery, whose banks of steps became the Town Square (enhanced by a realistic statue of the composer), the Gym (with appropriate backing) and the municipally ornate Park (leading to the footbridge?), while other scenes were delightfully augmented with fence sections (congratulations to **James Ashburner**, **Ed Britter**, **Aaron Green** and **Adam Mir**, who were so inventive as they mimed painting them) which magically reappeared in later scenes showing the results of their work. Impressive work, too, under **Eric Martin** from the Props Team of **Anne Fielding** and **Ann Hertler-Smith** supported by Company Members, Dawkes Music and Radlett LOS, **Joy Crawford**'s Costume Team of **Anthea Prosser**, **Shirley Wray-Brown** and **Lindsey Alcock**, and **Elizabeth Hampton**'s Make-up Team of **Alan and Pam Bailey** and **Ali Summerfield**, with hair styled by **Angela Evans**. And achieving wonders considering the lack of time for the get-in and rehearsals on stage, Stage Manager **Steve Stroud** and assistants **Keith Cochrane**, **Jeff Smith** and **Callum Toms**, with Sound by **Denis Cater**, **Ron Laver** and **James Riches** and Lighting by **John Cude** with **Ali Coe** as Follow-Spot Operator.

All their hard work must have seemed fully worth while when the curtains opened and we were presented with the best ever version of the unique opening sequence of this very special show, performed not (as normal) by a few passengers representing the train on its way to River City but by the **Whole Company** suddenly moving forward and turning the assemblage of trestles and cases on the front of the stage into a realistic railway coach. Brilliantly together as they moved and spoke in unison, their words representing the rhythms of the train as it speeded up and slowed down, telling us with amazing clarity and coordination the story of a confidence trickster going round the area and selling musical instruments to unsuspecting parents on the promise of establishing a Boys' Band. And such was the momentum that nerves were forgotten and every word was remembered, with solo lines confidently put over as they came by participants both big and small. A great achievement both for those on stage and for the adults who had trained and rehearsed them so well in the week of the Summer School: **Ann Hertler-Smith** (Director and Choreographer), **Roy Mathers** (Musical Director and Conductor so essential to that coordination), assisted by Singing Coach **Graham Nicholls**, Drama Coach **Helen Bailey** and Assistant MD **Richard Fairhead**.

With so many people on stage I'm afraid it was often impossible to see which of them was delivering each solo line in that opening scene and on other occasions, or if one did so to identify them by name afterwards despite the superb thumbnail pictures in the brilliantly helpful programme, which after careful study has I hope enabled me correctly to identify roles which were split (in various ways) between two performers; congrats to the performers again for getting it right, aided by Production Co-ordinator **Jill Schrodel**'s and the programme compilers' expertise.

Fully identifiable in that first scene were Train Conductor **Thomas Cooney** with his whistle and his well projected instructions, and **Nathan Ujeyah** as Charlie Cowell, the passenger who knew most about the man we were to see as The Music Man and communicated it to his fellow passengers and the audience with complete clarity and meaning (and without a microphone) before continuing on the train journey and only coming to River City towards the end of the show with the information, equally well put over, which started the citizens on their manhunt. **Elliott Parsons** as Marcellus Washburn, a reformed former associate of The Music Man, put over his surprise at meeting him in the Town nicely before being drawn into assisting him again and, after an interlude leading the *Shipooopi* revels, trying to help him escape from the manhunt, although his urgency would have shown more easily if he had been directed to leave the stage and dash back on with his messages.

The atmosphere of the small town, so essential to the piece, was well put over by its citizens led by **Callum Poltock**, whose Mayoral pronouncements were given out with the right authority, and his wife Eulalie Mackecknie Shinn, whose delusions of grandeur were as well illustrated by **Abby Dearing** as was the dedication to gossip shown by the *Pick-a-Little* sequences in which she led all the adult ladies with her forceful personality and well-projected singing and dialogue. Those ladies certainly included **Jaime Parsons** as Dorcas Britt, **Alice Bailey** (Ella Squires), **Alice Green** (Ethel Dunlop) and **Sofia Mihramane** (Alma Hix), all of whom had dialogue as well as the singing, and were augmented for the singing, beautifully co-ordinated and making charming stage pictures, by at least seven other of the ladies' chorus, including **Lucy Ashburner** and **Heather Malone**, who would have been playing Zaneeta Shinn and Alma Hix in the evening performance and the Paroo Family members not at that stage playing their principal roles. Their husbands **Louie Swallow** (Oliver Hix), **Nathaniel Faulls** (Olin Britt), **Tom Booth** (Jacey Squires) and **Evan Bevis-Knowles** (Ewart Dunlop) well showed their self-importance as the Members of the School Board responsible for keeping the Town respectable and put over their lines effectively, while **Henry Middleton** showed proper authority as the Marshall.

The younger generation was headed by **Sean Sullivan** as Tommy Djilas (who sang and spoke well and showed some nifty footwork, although the dance shoes didn't really help him to seem like a tearaway) and **Emily Pidgeon** as Zaneeta Shinn danced well. I've mentioned the alternate Zaneeta already, and am sure I saw the alternate Tommy (**Glen Scott**) doing good work in the chorus numbers and dance sequences, along with alternate Amaryllis (**Lucy Cooper**) and Winthrop (**Finn Sheehan**). The Amaryllis we saw (**Kassia Unwin**) seemed to enjoy bating Winthrop, although perhaps she learned by the end of the scene when she joined tunefully in the song, while Winthrop (**Conor Quinn**) cowered and lisped before suddenly finding his confidence and his singing voice with the imminent arrival of *The Wells Fargo Wagon* bringing his cornet, and later doing well with his excited dialogue and a finely sung *Gary, Indiana*. And **Aria Patel** as little Gracie Shinn sang her phrases and said her few lines charmingly.

Splitting the casting of the roles of Marion Paroo and her mother between the Acts left only one big scene for **Hanny Alcock** and **Kate Riches** as those characters in Act 1, and unforeseen problems backstage found Kate sitting fully lit on stage waiting for minutes before anyone arrived, with only an empty water jug and glass which she used intelligently to try to cover the gap, but it must have been a terrifying time for her and an unsettling time for Hanny offstage. They kept calm and completed their difficult speak/singing duet, although a little help from the Sound department might have assisted their initial words. Things soon settled down and the scene ended well with Hanny's advice to Amaryllis and her nicely sung *Goodnight My Someone*, downstage in a spotlight. **Hollie Summerfield**, taking over as Marion for Act 2, did well in expressing her suspicions of The Music Man, gradually changing to admiration after Winthrop's transformation, and then (with some annoyingly shrewd encouragement put over well by **Vickie Fischbacher** as her mother) into something more with the lovely duet *Till There Was You* and (ignoring Winthrop's protests) an enthusiastic clinch. I do hope all went well for both pairs in the later performance.

The show is, of course, all about The Music Man, or Professor Harold Hill, neither description being true, as revealed by Marcellus who called him Gregory or Greg throughout, and we saw two versions of the character firstly from **Ollie McLaughlin** and then from **Alec Coles-Aldridge**. **Ollie**, after remaining unnoticed in the train until his decision to leave it at River City, very soon had to tell the inhabitants *Ya Got Trouble* in the tongue-twisting and breath-defyingly long song, which he managed without hesitation or deviation making all the words audible (with proper assistance from the Sound Desk for the parts of it he sang from upstage). That, plus good dialogue and the Bandsman's hat he wore for *76 Trombones*, should have given him complete confidence, but he still nervously clutched his jacket's hem near the end of his Act. It was a fine performance and he should have no need for nerves in the future. Taking over after the interval (which for good reasons was taken earlier than was written for the original show) **Alec** had dialogue with the Paroos not designed to open an Act, but they all coped and he reacted well when told Winthrop's father was dead, and took the lead with authority when presenting the cornet and giving instructions. His considerable charm was a great asset in his clear and well-expressed dialogue, although I don't think he has had much practice in telling lies to young ladies. The dilemma of escaping from the mob or staying with Marion was clearly shown, with his rewards the finely sung *Till There Was You* and the clinch, plus the fairy-tale ending with the band and bandmaster in their lovely uniforms and the adulation of the residents whole-heartedly expressed. I was rather relieved that neither of the two actors completely convinced me that he would make a good confidence trickster in real life.

And so to **The Ensemble**, which in addition to those named above included Chorus Members **Amie Sullivan, Jessica Larkman, Bobbi Stroud, Rosie Castle, Anna Goraya, Esme Porter, Rachel Bailey, Maddy Franklin, Lucy Newton, Mason Bailey, Aisling Quinn** and **Jedd Spikesman**. Brilliantly together and confident in *Trouble*, particularly memorable when, facing upstage towards the singer, they turned each time in unison to deliver their interjections towards us; superbly varied with their flags in the School Hall with fine interludes by five young boys and five young girls (though don't look down to see whether you're on the correct foot!) and some send-up cheerleaders, while *76 Trombones* brought high quality pas de basques, boxes and counter-marching from everyone with buck and wings from the senior dancers while those not dancing watched and reacted intelligently. Act 2 gave us *The Wells Fargo Wagon*, sung with vigour and "well pointed" especially when the wagon was about to arrive, while *Shipooopi* was a highlight with the promised innovations including two propeller turns and some very effective little duets from older dancers before the smaller cast members suddenly filled the dance floor with a superbly executed routine.

Final comments: congratulations to the pit band of **Richard Fairhead** and **Stephen Lethbridge** on keyboards with **Adam Trisk**'s sensitive percussion for superb accompaniment to everything, including the final off-key *Minuet in G*; and to everyone involved in the wonderful week's work.