



THE WITCHES OF EASTWICK

CAODS at the Civic Theatre

28.02.14

A warm Friday-night crowd for The Witches of Eastwick – a rare amateur outing for Cameron Macintosh's adult musical for the millennium.

It's a long way from the Updike book that spawned the Nicholson film. A glitzy score [Dana P Rowe] and patchy lyrics [John Dempsey] were boosted in the West End by lavish settings and special effects.

Sallie Warrington's inevitably sparer staging has to rely on the talents of the cast, and, fortunately, she has three outstanding musical comedy stars to play the wisecracking witches at the heart of the show.

One by one, with the aid of a symbolic prop supplied by the Shirley Templish chorus [Abby Murphy], they are seduced by the demoniacal Darryl van Horne, in a superbly staged series of scenes. Jane, the cellist [Sarah Burton], Sukie the writer [Alison Hartley] and Alex the potter [Claire Carr] all fall for his devilish charms.

Gareth Barton has plenty of presence, and a great singing voice, as the Devil incarnate, with his medallion and his quiff. A difficult character to get into – I think I might have liked a little more charisma and a little less crude creepiness. Fortunately, and inevitably since this is a musical, he gets his come-uppance at the altar, thanks to one last prop – a voodoo doll. But not before – drum roll, glitter curtain, clapperboard – one last fling in the gospel-inspired Glory of Me.

A very strong supporting cast – David Gillet and Alice Masters as the young lovers [shame they have such a clunky duet] and Debra Sparshott outstanding as the busybody Mrs "I am Eastwick" Gabriel, a lovely character part, splendidly sung, too. And not forgetting Wylie Queenan as the "cute little guy" Fidel, the Fiend's factotum; exemplary stillness, lots of costume changes and a well-earned apotheosis at the very end.

The chorus is imaginatively used – sweeping across the stage, frozen at the opening, and impressively choreographed in the big production numbers like Dance with the Devil and, especially, Dirty Laundry.

A very polished pit orchestra, too, under the Musical Direction of Patrick Tucker.

The staging is simple – a Wizard of Oz feel to the backdrop, with the New England town where the Emerald City should be – but often clever, with screens and trucks keeping the show on the move. One interior piece fits all – variously dressed for the three seductions with music, books and fertility figures.

And, yes, there is flying – Kirby's of course.

That capacity crowd are enthusiastically appreciative at the curtain call – not so much, I guess, for the piece as for the stylish success that CAODS have made of it: an enjoyable revival of a rarity of the repertoire.