

Dirty Rotten Scoundrels – 28 February 2018

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A classy production of this unclassifiable show, with the classic team of Ray Jeffery in the director's chair and Bryan Cass in the pit.

No frills, but it looks very stylish, with scarlet and black costumes for the Riviera opening. The frocks – hunting pink and harem pants, blue Austrian for a couple of minutes on stage, air crew for a matter of seconds – fare better than the furniture. “Great Big Stuff” needs Louis XV rather than dralon. And the gowns are gorgeous, with all of the excellent female leads sporting wonderful wardrobes, while the poor old chaps struggle with trousers an inch or two too long.

The Scoundrels of the title include Barry Hester's suave shyster Lawrence, his “classic good looks” impersonating variously a dentist, a Prince and an Austrian quack, David Slater's corrupt policier, and Kieran Bacon's coarse, crass American conman, relishing the shameless bad taste of this “deliciously low” character, especially in his Ruprecht routine. Plus of course the Jackal, who eventually outwits them all.

Claire Carr gives a memorable Christine Colgate, lighting up the stage as the “genuine, sincere” Soap Queen. Her first entrance - “Here I Am” - nicely choreographed, appropriating the hotel's baggage trolley for a stunning routine. She has some of the best dresses, too – black satin for seduction, polka dot pants for her travelling outfit. And she's barely recognizable as one of the “boys”, all brassy bling and big lashes.

Helen Meah makes a lively Jolene, country girl from Oklahoma, and Helen Hart gives a beautifully sung Muriel, with exemplary presence: “What was a Woman to Do” – simply staged, with five ladies plus Jessica Broad's usherette in the stalls. Lots of polished production numbers, the cheesy Oklahoma, the Finale to Act 1, using the big chorus to good effect. They're also pressed into service to shift the furniture for the smoothly choreographed scene changes.

The set is simple – a hotel verandah, perhaps, with the sea subtly suggested beyond. Plenty of clever touches to distract from the patchy, improbable book - Freddy's transformation with the screen, the miracle in the bedroom, Tony Catchpole's clichéd accordionist for the lovely “Like Zis, Like Zat”, where Slater and Hart make an excellent couple in the senior seduction subplot. And excellent diction means that I catch the throwaway “Gregorian chanteuse” gag for the first time.

CAODS' next – opening on September 25 - will be another movie classic, the Essex premiere of Irving Berlin's Top Hat.