

Top Hat - Chelmsford Amateur Operatic and Dramatic Society at the Civic Theatre
(25th Sept 2018)

Review by Cheryl Rogers

Fans of both dance and Hollywood will of course know that Top Hat (the movie) is arguably the highlight of the Fred Astaire and Ginger Rogers partnership. A hard act to follow and especially for an amateur company, so congratulations to CAODS for accepting the challenge.

The storyline of Top Hat is rather weak. Basically an American musical star Jerry Travers, is in London to open his show, produced by his good friend Horace Hardwick. He stays in Horace's suite the night before the show opens and meets the woman in the suite below theirs, society girl and model Dale Tremont. They have an immediate mutual attraction but due to a mix-up, Dale believes that Jerry is Horace. The only problem is that Horace is married to her old friend Madge and so Dale decides to teach him a lesson. After much singing and dancing, they eventually sort it all out.

Mitchell Lathbury played Jerry Travers and provided us with a leading man who certainly could sing and dance. He tapped his way confidently through number after number, coping with the romantic scenes and the comedy equally well, obviously at home centre stage. His love interest was Katie Doran as Dale Tremont. She looked stunning in every beautiful gown she wore – and there were quite a few. Slim and elegant, pretty as a picture and a lovely dancer, she certainly fitted the bill. I've seen David Slater (Horace Hardwick) in other CAODS shows but this one was his best for me. He played the comedy very well, no mean feat when he was on stage so much and had to cope with the most unflattering props, including a bandage round one eye for a long section towards the end of the show. His wife Madge, was Robyn Gowers doing what she does best, portraying a likeable brash and brassy broad, with great comic timing. There were a few cameo parts in this show and they all added a huge amount to the overall production. Simon Bristoe took the role of Alberto Beddini, an Italian fashion designer – flamboyant, graceful, *very* Italian and giving every comedic moment its full potential. He had the audience laughing throughout his performance, he is a fine actor. In contrast, we enjoyed a quieter humour from Bruce Thomson as the serious Bates, Horace's personal valet. Every time he treated us to one of his 'family sayings' he created a different character and accent to deliver the line. Excellent. All these performers were supported by a team of well-trained tapping and singing chorus members, impressive.

Despite some cracking songs written by the remarkable Irving Berlin including 'Puttin' on the Ritz', 'I'm Putting All my Eggs in one Basket', 'Isn't This a Lovely Day', 'Cheek to Cheek', 'Let's Face the Music and Dance' and of course 'Top Hat, White Tie and Tails', the show does have its occasional slow moments. However, during this time the audience could appreciate the period costumes, which looked so good. The cast captured the elegance of the era with their 1930's poise and when the curtain opened onto the 'What is Love' number, the stage looked magical with the excellent lighting picking up the sparkle and glitter of the whole scene. Stunning.

All in all this was an ambitious undertaking and whilst no production will ever match the style and flair of Fred and Ginger, this had its own charm.