

Sweet Charity - Chelmsford Amateur Operatic and Dramatic Society at the Civic Theatre (23rd September 2021)

Review by Cheryl Jennings

At last! Live theatre is back! CAODS bit the bullet and went ahead with this production despite many hurdles to jump throughout their rehearsal period and the ever present concern of a possible last minute cancellation because of Covid rules. It was a gamble that they were brave to take but it paid off royally to the delight of all the audiences who attended their performances, desperate to see a live show once more.

Sweet Charity is mostly remembered for the film, starring Shirley MacLaine as the irrepressible Charity Hope Valentine, a dance hall hostess who just wants to escape her sordid occupation and find love with a decent man. She is a lovable character, optimistic, kind, funny, full of life but with an unfortunate gift for choosing men who constantly let her down. Shirley MacLaine made the part her own and is a hard act to follow, so with all the current constraints added to this, it was a triumph for Cassie Estall that she succeeded in hitting exactly the right note with her portrayal of Charity. Cassie *was* Charity, easily capturing the quirkiness, vulnerability and honesty that make up this character, and playing the comedy moments beautifully. Charity doesn't leave the stage during the entire performance which is a real test for a performer and Cassie is a pretty girl who can sing, dance and act, she cast her spell over us all and was a joy to watch as she pulled it off effortlessly with enormous charm.

Her fellow dancers and closest friends at the Fandango Ballroom, Nickie and Helene, were played by Katie Doran and Joanne Quinney who have lovely voices and also made the most of their comedy lines. These girls blended together brilliantly, seen at their best in the 'There's Gotta be Something Better Than This' number, which was excellent.

Charity meets Oscar who appears to be a perfect gentleman and just what she is looking for, they fall in love and a marriage proposal ensues. Michael Bardo was well cast in this role and played it exactly right, he was the ideal foil for Charity.

Gareth Barton took the part of the famous movie star, Vittorio Vidal. So good to see Gareth back treading the boards with CAODS, he has been missed. Jonathan Davis played the sleazy dance hall owner, Herman. He injected a comic side to his portrayal of the gruff, unsavoury character during his song 'I Love to Cry at Weddings', a great number that begs to be sent up. David Everest-Ring was Daddy Brubeck, the leader of the Rhythm of Life Church which gave an excuse to use a gloriously hippie scene. He led his congregation of colourful hippies in the 'Rhythm of Life' song which brought the stage alive and also gave the whole chorus chance to appear.

The only negative comments about this production for me, are that I think the dance hall girls who offered 'extras' on the side could have looked and behaved more brazenly, as befitted a low grade dance hall rather than a nightclub, especially in the 'Big Spender' number. The customers also were a bit too 'clean' to make it understandable why the girls found it so undesirable to work in that environment. I was also not sure the ending of the show worked as well as other endings I have seen of this show, it was a little understated and lacked impact

but this aside, what a splendid return to the stage for CAODS. The audience was very appreciative and obviously enjoyed every minute of this production. At the end of the finale the cast turned to face upstage where a huge banner appeared high across the back of the stage with the slogan 'The Show Must Go On' emblazoned on it. I don't suppose I was the only one with tears in my eyes. Lovely touch CAODS! Can't wait for 'Kipps' in the spring.