

## **Gloucester Drama Association**

### **Full length play competition 2006/7 Adjudicators: Graham Bill & Adrian Bull**

#### **Kiss me Kate – CODS (29/1/07)** **The Playhouse Theatre, Cheltenham**

This is such a wonderful musical! Witty writing, comedy, songs that range from tender love ballad to show-stopping, whole-cast number, strong characters, dance routines... everything that could be expected from a show about putting on a play. It was a good challenge for this company to take on, and they rose to the occasion to produce a super evening's entertainment. This is a "play within a play". The lively telling of the storyline of the actors' lives was very well matched with the quality of playing of the internal Shakespearean drama. As a result Kiss me Kate was extremely satisfying to watch. The denouement of both dramas, satisfyingly resolved the mirrored conflicts in both. This was a real credit to directors and cast.

The programme, cleverly designed to refer to both the musical and the Taming of the Shrew, was packed with information relating to the performance. A gobo of a "Taming of the Shrew logo" was projected onto the closed curtains of the proscenium arch stage and drew the audience into the piece as the orchestra played the overture.

It is the sense of teamwork that came across so strongly. CODS is very fortunate to have a chorus line with such energy, focus and skill.

The piece opened with appropriate bustle and impact. "Another op'nin' of another show" is a standard that has grown beyond it's origins. Well done to Hattie, played by Jo Manuel, for taking in both hands the opportunity to start the show well. This number showed very well the skills of the director, Jason Blackburn, Choreographer, Karen Townsend and Dance Captain, Ginny Hemming. Stage business with step ladders, plenty of acting "off the ball" and excellent connection with the audience set a really high benchmark that was maintained throughout the show's big numbers.

The set was well designed and executed. There was plenty of room for movement and the dance numbers benefited from the levels created. Nowhere was this more in evidence than in the second half opener, "Too darn hot". To set this on the roof was inspirational. I do not know if this is textual, but it worked! This positively fizzed. Super solo singing, from Kat Peace, excellent chorus work both vocally and in movement, and the impression of tiles and roof furniture combined to give one of the strongest moments of the show, matching the finale.

The split-focus of the two dressing rooms linked by the chaise longue, centre stage worked admirably. However, we were not quite sure of the authenticity of the pink fluffy telephone. And please could it have been a dialling phone, not a push button? I particularly like the stage door scenes. The brown tabs worked well and the little office, trucked on, seemed well in keeping with the period of the piece and had a certain, well-frequented feel.

The scenes in Padua were appropriately set. The gondoliers gave nice detail to the set for “We open in Venice”, creating a good stage picture. Petruchio’s house in Padua was fine, although, the furniture seemed a little mis-matched. The set for the finale was absolutely super. In all cases the scenes were effectively complemented by the colour wash on the diorama.

The energy from the orchestra pit is a vital ingredient! The orchestra played tunefully and with a good pace and swing. The levels were good. There was a fine balance of volume of instrument and voice. The musical director Beverly Whitaker, and her musicians, including the rehearsal pianists, are to be congratulated.

Pace of the piece is crucial element of direction. The director encouraged a cracking pace and this counter-pointed nicely with the slower ballads. The attention of the audience was held from beginning to end. Stage pictures were very pleasing. This was especially true when large numbers were on stage. Levels were used well. And the cast demonstrated strong, well-maintained focus.

Andy Bartlett took responsibility for lighting and sound. The lighting was generally helpful, but there were some regrettable black holes in key places centre left and centre right. Perhaps a lamp had blown? Petruchio’s ballad was badly affected by this. His head moved in and out of light most distractingly. Whilst it is possible for an actor to “find and hold the light”, he and others were not best served by this lack of light. The spotlights were well used. The big numbers were appropriately bright, the diorama used especially well and the gobo for the church scene worked nicely.

The costume, make up and props teams for this show worked tremendously well together. The vision of two sets of costume for two very different pieces was not easy to co-ordinate. The effect was stunning. The opening scene of hoofers and stagehands, the red and black theme for “Too darn hot” and the quality of the Shakespearean scenes created a splendid spectacle. A couple of discordances in the costumes for Gremio and Hortensio were far, far out-weighed by the whole.

Mike Pandazis as Fred Graham/Petruchio gave us a strong male lead. He created a dynamic character. His projection, tone and American accent were excellent. He commanded the stage with an easy, relaxed manner. It is difficult to put one song above the others as one felt very much at ease with the quality and delivery of his singing. “I’ve come to wive it wealthily in Padua” was warm and powerful. It contrasted so well with “Were thine that special face” and “Where is the life that late I led”.

His tortured relationship with Lilli was well portrayed. There were some excellent looks across stage behind Lilli’s back, which were played for the audience to appreciate, but not communicating directly to them. The moment when he spanked Lilli was very humorous. His reaction to the gangsters worked very well and we empathised with him as his flowers and love note went predictably astray. The character is quite complex. His affections move from one girl to another and back again and it is important that the audience understands that

in playing Petruchio as he does, he is playing the subtext of improving the relationship with Lilli. This double layer was clear.

Sarah Roberts took the roles of Lilli Vanessi and Kate. These are challenging roles for the strongest of voices! She worked hard to create the feisty characteristics necessary. Strength, subtlety and depth are all demanded to bring the range of emotions to life through both acting and singing performances. “Wunderbar” the early duet with Fred, was good. The warmth in the initial discovery of the flowers and love note, the tone of the spats with Fred, the Kate’s return for the finale... all showed signs of Ms Roberts’ acting abilities. However, her connection with the lyrics of “So in love” and “I hate men”, both essential in showing the diametrically opposed sides of the character(s), might have been stronger.

Nicky Bisset was Lois Lane and Bianca. She displayed a lovely “sassiness” in her singing and acting, especially through the use of her eyes and tone of expression. This was especially so in “Tom, Dick or Harry”. Here, the trio of suitors worked very well with her to bring out the fun in the song. Ms Bisset’s singing skills were good. “Always true to you” showed her range and her dancing skills. It might have been better not to complicate the song with the different male characters for her to dance with. Perhaps this was in the book, but it didn’t feel as if it quite worked.

How does one run this show and not allow the gangsters to steal the show? They are probably two of the most joyous parts to play in musical theatre. Our compliments to Dan Bacon and Colin Cooper, who showed such good skill in timing and expression, to earn the laughs without milking them. They were a good team. I thought “Flanagan and Allen” in “Brush up your Shakespeare”. In “disguise” in particular, Colin Cooper was good at underplaying a moment, in pirouetting, double takes, holding a moment for the audience to appreciate something funny etc. I also very much liked the dryness of his delivery and his Bronx (?) gangster accent. Dan Bacon, on the other hand, played the “straight” guy. His voice and gestures were “harder” than his partner, which gave the perfect foil and generated that sense of partnership needed. Nonetheless, he too enjoyed good audience response and, like his partner in crime, worked “Brush up your Shakespeare” with a fine relaxed style.

Neil Burge was more than a match for Lois Lane. He played the roles of Bill and Lucentio. It is a rare thing to find a performer in amateur theatre that can hold the audience, dancing around the stage singing to a flower, as if it were his girl. And Mr Burge did it with quality and panache. The trick was to believe in what he was doing. It worked! He also showed a good singing voice, in numbers such as “Why can’t you behave”.

The other duo to mention is Gremio and Hortensio. Played by Richard Kirtley White and Mike Welsh respectively, these two were at their best as suitors for the hand of Bianca. Good expression and lively connection with the Shakespearean lines characterised their performances.

David Johnson, as Harry Trevor and Baptista, gave a very solid performance. His understanding and delivery of the Shakespearean lines were a delight. This was a well-judged performance that would have sat happily in a complete presentation of the “Shrew”.

Ralph, the stage manager, played by Dominic Hayne, created a clear character with good accent and diction, for the scenes with Fred and Lilli. He had an appropriate, business-like manner in controlling the cast on set. The smaller roles, such as Gerry Bevan as Paul, and Nathaniel, (Mike D'Ambrosio), Gregory, (Chris Hannant), Philip, (Mark Kukula) and the Haberdasher, (Rob Barton-Ancliffe) were well cast. Henry Amphlett gave a neat cameo of a "Colonel Saunders" character, with nice stage presence and projection. Vernon Morse looked and played the stage doorman with comforting familiarity.

This was a highly enjoyable evening. The particular joy was in finding a company that had such strong chorus work, strong visual impact and energy. And to discover that Shakespeare was being played just as meaningfully as the text and songs from the musical!

Thank you for giving us the opportunity to appreciate it.