

FIRST NIGHT REVIEW

'Fame'

North West Theatre Arts Company

Artistic Direction Prab Singh, Musical Direction Beth Singh, Choreography Katie Gough.

The Grange Arts Centre: 26th – 29th July 2017.

When *Fame the Movie* appeared 37 or so years ago, nobody could ever have dreamt that it would have been such an enduring success. The reason for this is probably several-fold. You can't ever say that *Fame* was ground breaking in any way, but what it did do was reinvigorate and popularise the dance-musical genre for a new, young generation – and it has continued to do so. And spawning a franchise of a TV series and then this stage incarnation in no small measure kept the brand alive and vitally, relevant to (more) new audiences. The growth of contemporary dance as a pastime and prime-time entertainment has additionally fuelled new audiences in recent years thus adding to its sustained relevance. And what of the piece? Well, it isn't exactly brain food, but it has passion, energy, feel-good and fuels a timeless interest in the human story, the fight to succeed, to overcome; this makes up for any inadequacies the show might have as a piece. And I have no doubt that the current dance-off generation will demand another facelift of it in due course. But in the hands of a production team who get it, it has at the heart of it some great dramatic opportunities which pass many productions by. So, against that backdrop, NWTAC now pick up the gauntlet add their own, fast growing reputation for quality into the mix.

But how did they do?

From the first word, bar and move of this preview night performance, it didn't feel, look or sound like this was a preview performance from a cast ranging in age from 8 to 23 (yes, you did read correctly, 8 to 23). There was an energy, an engagement, a focus which felt like it was the product of a seasoned company well into a run.

And Prab Singh's direction made the opening and what followed fascinating storytelling, and which was consistently absorbing. He brought out such detail, such passion, honesty which made the people, their story and the performance of it, more than another musical. He found the drama, put simply, the 'acting' opportunities in this piece which many don't realise are there as they chase after the cheese and the moves. He captured the stillness when it was needed and the frenetic when required, but always made it cohesive, fluid, picking out the humour when it arrived and then switching to the pathos in a breath. The classroom scene in act 2 was a great example and exceptional.

Beth Singh's work on the vocals made – as ever - for a glorious sound. And what was fascinating for this company of such a varying age range and experience was that you forgot the former and the latter was simply indistinguishable. She also found the drama opportunities which are hidden between the bars of the numbers and evidenced just how intuitive she is in maximising them.

For such a character-driven piece (and there are so many) there was great definition, individuality, distinction across them. And this was replicated across all the cast, not just the named roles which says an awful lot for the standard of the casting and the whole company.

Katie Gough's choreography was very cleverly managed as she interpolated so many levels of ability seamlessly and with such attitude and attack. It was excellent and I loved her work.

Mark Beaumont's set made great use of the space whilst still giving this big company the facility to do the numbers and the choreography justice. And great to see the company interacting with the set, moving it, re-setting it.

With all I've said, it is so difficult to single out individual performances, but it is disingenuous not to highlight them and take up the space doing so. Katie Damar (Miss Sherman), Eleanor Conway-Holroyd (Mrs Myers), Emily Cavanagh (Mrs Sheinkopf) and Jasmine Nisic (Ms Bell), are well, wow - some acting talent; they were exceptional. So intuitive, natural, spontaneous. The duet from Damar and Nisic was a highlight of the production; Damar's act 2 solo is such a deceptively difficult number and it was beautifully and maturely delivered and ended up being a favourite performance/number of the whole piece.

It is difficult to appreciate that this was a first principal role for Elton Amoateng (Joe Vegas) and was one he should be rightly, very proud of. After all, he had the line of the piece: "We're all gonna get naked and play Twister on my Mom's water bed."

In her last role with the company, Tempany Windsor (Carmen Diaz) delivered a flawless

performance which bodes well for her future – and she certainly deserves one. An outstanding vocal, actress and dancer in equal measure. ‘They know how to do it in LA’ – and that is how you deliver a big number.

Jamie Coyne (Tyrone Jackson) gave a first-class performance of attitude, style and of a breadth which, hopefully, showcased his future. Balance that against such a sensitive and well-judged performance from Kate Bannister (Iris Kelly). She was a joy to watch.

Liam Watson (Nick Piazza) and Rachel Redford (Serena Katz) created a superb pairing and I must say, Redford’s singing was pretty damn fine, both in the vocal and the presentation and she nailed her act two solo which is such a big ask.

And to be honest, all the principals shone in what for me was one of the best productions the company have presented: Jonny Molyneux (Schlomo) who is such a consistently fine actor; Reece Challinor (Goodman) and Eva Carty (Grace) turned in performances which were so damn good that so much so, I just wanted their roles to have been bigger to enjoy their skill, their talents. And lastly and by no means least, a mention for Emiglia Fellone-Scott (Mabel). A superb vocal in her act 2 number.

A fun packed, fast paced production with great company discipline, concentration and energy and I reckon you will have to go far to see *Fame* bettered.

I don’t say this easily but I need to be honest and pin my colours to the mast: NWTAC are gathering a reputation as one of the most consistent, edgy and accomplished youth theatre companies in the area. And it is so much deserved.

Fame reinforces that yet again.

NWTAC always deserve the audiences but this production demands them. And if that was just a preview, Lord knows what you are in for during the run.

Martin Paul Roche – First Night Reviews

Theatre writer, Reviewer and Drama Festival Adjudicator

www.martinpaulroche.com