

NORTH ESSEX THEATRE GUILD

SHOWCASE FESTIVAL 2015/2016

ADJUDICATION

Group	Brantham Amateur Theatrical Society
Venue	Brantham Village Hall
Date of Adjudication	Friday 19 th February 2016
Production	HOT MIKADO by David H Bell and Rob Bowman based on 'The Mikado' by Gilbert & Sullivan
Director	John Hoskyns
Adjudicated by	Ian Amos
Co-adjudicator	Jenny Burke

Introduction

There was a warm welcome at Brantham Village Hall and a capacity audience. The programme was glossy and informative. It was good to see lots of local advertising – heartening both that someone has made the effort to go out and get it (not easy) and that local businesses are supporting their local theatre group.

There was a good atmosphere created pre-show by the band playing cool jazz in their 'Blues Brothers' suits, hats and shades.

Set

The set was basic but effective. There were delightfully painted 'Japanese' panels to the left and right of the stage and across the back wall, with skilfully executed blossoms. A couple of table and chairs (brave to stand on that type of folding chair – I have known them to fail in productions). I did wonder if painting them black might have been more Japanese in style – but maybe they were brown for the Americana setting: 'Hot Mikado' is such a mish-mash that you can get away with a lot. The band was at the back of the stage installed behind wooden painted panels and lots of "Hot Club" logo-ing: The reds and blacks were suitably Japanese and nightclub atmospheric.

Choreography

There was lots to enjoy in the choreography and the cast and chorus had been well-rehearsed in their moves. It had lashings of period style: a touch of jazz with a little pizzazz. Once in a while I felt the chorus had a little too much to do and that perhaps a slight paring back of moves might have not gone amiss. But the overall impression was of lots of energy and lots of originality with a melting pot of styles.

Costumes/Hair

The costumes were well thought out. The style and era of the piece was consistent – if consistent is quite the right word with Japan and America deliberately colliding. Costumes and characters matched well. Highlights were the amazing white suit worn by The Mikado, the three little maids in their pinafores, the chorus of younger members with their coloured shirts and braces, Pooh-Bah's gangster spiv suit and the wedding simply signalled with the addition of corsages and buttonholes. The overall simplicity of the look belied the amount of work taken to achieve it.

There were times when hats added to shadowing of the eyes – but mostly there seemed to be awareness of this common problem and they were soon removed and carried in hand. I wondered about the odd combination of Ko-Ko's *tan* hat with *black* suit.

A lot of effort had gone into the hairstyles. So often these are not in keeping. Here they worked well and really added to the whole.

Music

What a good and varied sound the four-piece band achieved - helped by the doublings nay triplings or more of Hannah Wainwright on flute, clarinet and saxophone at least. The band set the mood preshow playing coolnightclub jazz and continued this in their accompanying of the mainshow. They were at their best (as is the music in the show) when it truly swings along. Some numbers are a little too close to the original and these do not fare so well – the fault of the show and not the players. The musical is a mix of jazz, gospel, blues, swing, torch song and scat singing – and it is the band that unifies these many influences.

Occasionally I did feel that the band slightly overpowered the singers and words were not clear 100% of the time – which seemed strange when the main performers were wearing radio mikes. Words are just so important to G & S, and to the Mikado, hot or not!

Well done to the band and MD who a number of times had to skip bars or speed up to keep track of performers. There was some really top-notch slices of singing, often in the more difficult ensemble numbers – “I am so proud”, the a capella “Madrigal” and “Here's a how-de-do”.

Lights

There was a colourful general cover with everyone lit well and no shadowy dark spots to notice. It was good to have *two* follow spots to focus on the leads. That said – I thought it was an odd decision to leave Katisha in darkness for ‘Tit Willow’ – it had would have been nice to see her reactions as the song's *raison d'être* is her adamant heart being melted by Ko-Ko's story and not the puppet bird (funny though this was). Certain chorus numbers were lifted by ‘disco’ lighting on the side panels. This worked well. Also successful were the deep reds around the Hot Club band – suitably moody and cool. All in all – a successful lighting plot.

CAST

David Chilton (ko-Ko)

David's Ko-Ko had lots of poise and style. He played him as an English gentleman (he didn't go for an American accent, but he was not alone, and it didn't seem to matter too much in the madcap world of 'Hot Mikado'). A little tentative at first, David warmed into the part and was confidently bestriding the stage by the finale to Act One. In the 'List Song' he had a notepad which he used as an aide-memoire: He (or the director?) could have so easily have brought the notepad into the song's business and openly used it (as Ko-Ko) to refer to. David was clear and expressive in his delivery, a suitably cheeky chappie, and sang 'Tit Willow' comically well, as well as the more demanding ensemble songs that Ko-Ko finds himself in the middle of. Well done!

Ryan Maslen (Nanki-Poo)

Ryan has a cheeky confidence on stage. His Nanki-Poo was strong and not the wishy-washy wimp that Nanki-Poo can sometimes be. He sang, moved and delivered his dialogue well. He also brought a charm to the part – even providing an actual trumpet fanfare at one point – a nice touch. Ryan is a good all-round performer.

Becky Hoskyns (Yum-Yum)

Becky's Yum-Yum was always bright-eyed, always smiling. She acts well, is thoroughly involved, and possesses a nice rapport with her fellow performers: She has a real stage presence. Becky's solo singing of 'The Sun whose rays' was a delight (and a highlight of the evening for me). Well done!

Lesley Mercer (Pitti-Sing)

Lesley had some of the more stratospheric jazz sections to sing – and she did this with lots of attack. Part of a good team along with Becky and Faith as the 'little maids', she had a beaming and expressive face and was thoroughly in the thick of things.

Faith Arnold (Peep-Bo)

Faith as Peep-Bo was an effective member of the 'Three Little Maids' team, adding accurate harmony and a bright demeanour. She moved well and was wholly enthusiastic and on-the-ball in the role.

Ryan Lenney (Pish-Tush)

What a flexible performer Ryan is! From his pratfalls that opened the show, his good solo voice and nice harmonisations in songs. He was rather slow on picking up his dialogue cues early on in the show, but he soon got into his stride and picked up the pace. He was a supportive ensemble player.

Geoff Hewitson (Pooh-Bah)

Geoff's multi-character Pooh-Bah was a solidly warm presence. Like a number of his fellow actors he was a reliable harmony member for a few ensembles, such as the fiendishly difficult "I am so proud". Suitably upright, being many pillars of Tittipu society, Geoff had a wry comic smile to accompany the plot's civil service machinations.

Fiona Morris (Katisha)

Fiona's Katisha moved around the stage, a be-turbaned, gold-kaftan-ed Norma Desmond of a character. She really enjoyed this femme (almost literally) fatale and beneath the brash manner there was a twinkle in her eye. Katisha's two solo songs in 'Hot Mikado' are very demanding, really exposing the singer and needing a rich low range. Fiona really went for it – and mostly it worked. There was a little wandering intonation (the voice can be so hard to wholly control when singing such sustained lines), but her overall presence won the day.

Len Stockdale (The Mikado)

What a fun creation Len's Mikado was: The spiv gangster, white-suited, bling-jewelled bounding onto the stage. Perhaps this creation was less intimidating than he might have been, as Len has quite a light voice, but he is a real showman. He zoomed around the stage (perhaps a little too much), gave us a touch of tap and lots of energy. As with Ko-Ko, no attempt at an American accent, but an entertaining performance nevertheless.

Chorus

It was a joy to see such a range of ages; singing and dancing, smiling and brimming with enthusiasm. Good also to see the younger members fully engaged in the action: They were so confident in their moves, even when quite complex. In the long and dramatic Finale to Act One they were given a number of opportunities to shine.

Production

This was a thoroughly enjoyable evening. Enthusiasm was the key word. The delightfully multi-aged cast threw themselves into the world of the show. The balancing of the original music filtered through a new jazz lens was handled well by the performers, band and the show's MD. Movement was mostly accurate and well-rehearsed.

There was a prolonged dumb-show opening to the show. I do love a running joke and the repeated pratfalls were well executed, and the pass-the parcel of the shoe box neatly done - but it did all outstay its welcome a little and I couldn't help wondering if it might not have been a stronger opening to go straight into the first number. The blocking was quite successful - especially when there were large groups on the small stage. The dialogue delivery was slow upfront with gaps before the cues were being picked up. I suspect the drawling American accents were also tending to slow things at times. Thankfully things warmed up as the show went on. I thought the puppet bird in "Tit Willow" was a delight and its in-heaven halo, inspired!

This was a production packed with energy and packed with talent – and if it had the odd rough edge it didn't really matter as sheer exuberance carried it through. This was really an ensemble effort: There were lots of good performances but no one who stood out (and I do not mean that in a negative way) - it was the combined effort that made the show.