

Martin Paul Roche

Ghost the Musical

North West Theatre Arts Company

Directed by Prab Singh

Bath House Theatre: 21st – 25th July 2015.

(Performance reviewed – Preview 20th July)

‘Ghost The Musical’ follows a tried and tested approach of recent years: take a successful film and make it work for stage and hope the legacy of the film will influence the receipts at the theatre box office. The stage book therefore varies very little from the screenplay. OK, the story is a sandwich made from a cheesy bun, a slice of overly sentimental filling and lashings of corn sauce but surprisingly, it works; in some ways better than the film and explains why it has (rightly) been popular with audiences across the world.

Musically, the odd thing with the piece is that the main number (‘Unchained Melody’) never gets performed completely, but gets the musical theatre treatment of featuring in different guises/settings a number of times. The really clever thing is that apart from that one number, there are few truly memorable songs in the whole score – which would kill many a musical. But the arrangements are so well done that it is very listenable which I guess in a bizarre way, helps in not detracting from the story. The vehicle is the story and the characters, not the songs, which is odd for a musical, but not when it is based on a modern (albeit not classic), hugely popular film.

In this production, the split-level staging both horizontally and vertically is an ingenious use of the space with key props that draw the eye and create an engaging visual.

Music is provided by a cracking set of commissioned tracks that thankfully, work exceptionally well and are well managed by the desk.

And that great ill of all theatre – the American Accent – is capably delivered and has a subtlety and an ease that washes over you like everything else in this cleverly constructed production. And Prab Singh and his production team achieve a very natural, unforced production with direction/choreography at ease with itself and allowing fully rounded characterisations that have no pretence. He allows the youthful exuberance, passions, hopes for a future,

longings for a past to be reborn, just happen without over-effort and with a sizzling pace. And vitally, love is the heart of this piece and it was spontaneous, believable, engaging.

And this was a reasonable size cast with a huge range of ages – and all from the locale. No shipped in company. And they possessed individuality, character and they all possessed that trademark passion of the production. But to use a well-worn cliché without embarrassment, they all had one collective very high standard. And this was evidenced by the teamwork and slick manner in which the company set and re-set the staging. And the quality of the company and secondary principal vocals was, I have to say, first-rate. Well-balanced harmonies and top-notch solo lines; and matched by their acting, particularly ‘off the page’. Bags of detail and absorbing to watch. Great examples were provided Jonny Molyneux as the hospital ghost and Adam Whitmore as the subway ghost/Orlando. Super performances, packed with detail and stage presence. But all were equal to them and the standards of the production.

Technically, the piece is a big ask. But in the main, the requirements of the spirits and their movements, actions were all accommodated very well. And bear one thing in mind. The technical team are students – all of them.

A team that any theatre would be envious of when you consider what they have achieved (and their ages). Both technically and artistically it would be an absolute sin if this didn’t bode well for their futures.

And what of the principals?

Well, as you would anticipate, they did not disappoint. Every voice was on the money and the quality of the drama, the stagecraft and the detail in the performances was first rate.

Curtis Grime as the murderous character Willie had just the right amount of menace to be credible. Very nicely done. Rachel Redford as Molly had a super tone to her voice and used that instrument effortlessly across a pretty good range. Theo Spofforth as Sam gave a very well judged and mature performance and didn’t over play it: natural, passionate, convincing. Alex Harford was the multi-faceted, multi-faced Carl. A really big ask for any player to cover all the bases: the friend, the businessman, the cheat and charlatan and do it convincingly? Well, from what I saw, he is a talented actor with a voice to match.

And Oda Mae played by Olivia Hollamby was gloriously full-on without taking it too far and superbly supported by Natasha Holt and Jasmine Nisic who's playing standard deserved bigger roles and just made you want to return to another production and see them in their own right.

So as a musical, it's not the best in the catalogue. But Prab Singh's production of this very talented, committed and hard working young company ensures the heart strings are pulled, the few laughs hit home and the tears are given the opportunity to flow.

I've seen and reviewed the production a number of times and the standard has always been very high. This is up there with them and I struggle to see it being done a great deal better in similar circumstances.

The company's website states that '...NWTAC serves north Manchester in the production and performance of professional and high-quality work.' Going off the preview night, this production does exactly what it says on the packet. It is a company and a theatre that deserves greater public and monetary recognition. Over to you to make it happen.

PS...and who would have thought, 40 years later, I would be sat in my old baths watching a musical!

Martin Paul Roche – First Night Reviews

Theatre writer, Critic and Drama Festival Adjudicator