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Society	Centre Stage
Production	Holiday Inn
Date	16 November 2023
Venue	Bridewell Theatre
Report by	Matt Bentley

Show Report

General

Holiday Inn is a lesser known entry into the stable of musicals that started out as films which felt like adaptations of existing musicals. Other examples include *Singin' in the* Rain and *Moulin Rouge*. In this case, the film predated the stage musical by over 70 years and it's hard to see how it remained unstaged for so long. Equally, it's hard to see how this adaptation isn't a regular fixture on the community theatre circuit already.

It's difficult to know where to start with this report, except to say that those who have come to rely on NODA reports to provide advice and constructive feedback for use in future productions will, for the most part, be sorely disappointed. This production was, quite simply, outstanding. The majority of this report will be an attempt to find enough superlatives to convey how truly excellent it was. A huge congratulations to everyone involved.

Direction

That isn't to say this was a flawless, perfect production – that would make it boring and perfunctory. This went beyond those tedious words and provided some pure, entertaining theatre that was vibrant, exciting and unashamedly decadent. This was in no small part to the expert stewardship of directorial duo **Tal Hewitt** and **Stephen Hewitt**.

Everything on stage had been meticulously considered. The entire cast knew exactly what they were doing and how their role(s) contributed to the overall narrative, making the storytelling exceptionally clear. Every moment had been polished, but more than that, the cast knew the entire show well enough to seamlessly improvise on the rare occasion something didn't go to plan. As an audience member, it was possible to completely relax and get lost in the show without worrying about the possibility of any mishap, and that is a luxury when attending any show.

Choreography

Holiday Inn has some huge dance numbers, and here they were in the very capable hands of **Vanessa Forte** and **Vaughan Watts**. Not only was every number polished until it gleamed, but they also managed to challenge themselves to include extra tricks like a skipping rope tap sequence. It felt as if all the dancers were pushed to that ideal point between what they thought they could do and what they were actually capable of, which worked to excellent effect. Even the more dated songs were made to feel fresh and vibrant, with a few featuring a knowing nod or two to their antiquity.

Musical Direction

Dominic Veall had the unenviable task of steering a cast of 27 and an orchestra of 16 through 24 famous songs, all while completely visible to the audience. This is no mean feat, but to do it in a way that sounded so fantastic is an incredible achievement. Again, every cast member knew exactly what they were doing and produced a superb sound, both as a team and in individual numbers. Even the better-known songs were given a new life, making them feel refreshed and energetic. The orchestra produced a stunning sound, which surely would have excited even the most discerning Irving Berlin afficionado.

Cast

Before the show began, one of the Directors was adamant that this was "all them", meaning the cast. While that may not be completely true, this cast was absolutely pivotal in turning a technically excellent production into one that oozed charm and charisma. Every person on that stage gave this show everything they had, which was a great deal of talent, and there wasn't a single weak link.

Leading the cast was **Joe McWilliam** as Jim Hardy, and this role fit him like a glove. It's a challenging part, but there was an effortless nature to Joe's performance which let the audience know they were in safe hands. He mastered the old-movie rhythm of the dialogue, and ensured the character was genuinely relatable throughout. He approached each musical number with bags of energy and pulled off everything from classic ballads to big dance routines.

Supporting Joe were **Isabella Jackson** as Linda Mason and **Navin Nair** as Ted Hanover. Both were charmingly entertaining performances, with each bringing a strong sense of character to the roles, as well as their excellent vocal and dance abilities. Navin's showstopping sequence as a drunk gatecrasher was particularly memorable. Similarly, Isabella shone when Linda was dragged far outside her comfort zone to perform for the cameras.

Making a welcome return to the Bridewell stage as Louise Badger was **Corin Miller**, who always demonstrates an excellent stage presence. Here she leaned into her wonderful sense of comic timing to give us a grounded, unstoppable force of a character which was, in turns, both delightful and endearing. This character combined with Corin's talent as a musical theatre performer to give a number of show highlights, including the irrepressible *Shaking the Blues Away*.

Special mention must be made of **Hannah Bryant**'s performance as Lila Dixon. Not only did Hannah demonstrate excellent ability as a vocalist and dancer, but her comic timing was also exceptional. Lila has a lot of fantastic lines, but Hannah somehow found additional ways to add further comedy through her delivery and reactions, giving Lila some of the loudest laughs in the show.

Two more strong character performances were given by **Will Garrood** as Danny and **Miriam Jaffe** as Charlie Winslow. Will managed to pull of the unenviable task of portraying a likeable theatre producer, and his pretence at improvising during the set changes was hilarious. Miriam struck the right balance of endearing and precocious in her portrayal of the child of the local bank manager. Both also slipped into various ensemble numbers with ease, showcasing their versatile talents.

The ensemble itself was also bursting with talent. Led by the always excellent **Will Emery** as dance captain, every ensemble member showed total commitment to character and choreography, making the show a rich, vibrant tapestry of people. Plenty of attention was paid to the detail of each ensemble character's track, ensuring that everyone had a standout moment. This builds on the excellent ensemble work Centre Stage has been turning in over the last few years, continuing to lift the bar and ensuring every cast member is valued.

Production

This was a very tight, cohesive production, led by Technical Production Manager **Mark Steward**. It was clear that every element of the show had been carefully designed to fit with each other, and there was evidently plenty of collaboration between the production teams. The unity of the design and the way it aligned with the direction heightened the feeling that the audience was in very safe hands here.

Costumes

Geri Hutyan had a huge undertaking in costuming this show, with a plethora of requirements covering standard ensemble numbers as well as those dedicated to a particular holiday. Every one of the many, many costumes on stage was well chosen, and absolutely looked the part. There wasn't a single moment when something seemed out of place. A particularly clever solution was the white dresses, which were paired with differing glove colours to represent different holidays.

Set & Props

This was a very simple but very effective set design, with concept by **Tal Hewitt** and realisation by **Mark Steward**. The incredibly versatile back wall was used in a variety of ways to ensure the audience was never in any doubt as to the location of a particular scene. The floor was painted in beautifully-rendered floorboards, which added a dynamic feeling to the performance space. The space itself, though, was kept as clear as possible, allowing for the entire depth of the Bridewell to be used, which enhanced both the large ensemble numbers and the more intimate scenes.

The programme doesn't mention who was in charge of props, but it is worth noting that these were selected and used well, with dozens coming on and off in the first farmhouse scene alone. The only oddity was the use of a Star of David as part of the Christmas tree decoration – it was unclear whether this was an intentional statement or an oversight, but given current international events, its inclusion didn't feel consistent with the remainder of the production.

Stage Management

Given the amount of activity that must have been going backstage, the show ran incredibly smoothly and with very few noticeable issues. Stage Manager **Mark Steward** must run a tight ship to achieve such an excellent result. It's very difficult to keep backstage to a minimum during any show with a tap number, but in this case the only offstage noises that were audible were a bit of tapping immediately before the ensemble came onstage, and a bit more after the tap number. This was a great relief to those of us who have sat through plenty of less-disciplined tap shows in the Bridewell.

Sound

Given the large cast and orchestra, you would think the sound would be a challenge, but **Henry Whittaker**'s design made it seem effortless. Every performer was clearly heard, and the balance was excellent with nothing overpowering anything else. A joy to hear. Even the briefly crackling microphone near the beginning of the performance was dealt with almost immediately.

Lighting

This was another production element that was kept simple and classy via a delightful design by **Chris Taylor** and **Alok Kumar**. The bright, clean feel of the farmhouse contrasted nicely with the more colourful ensemble numbers, which were enhanced by the wise use of a cyc cloth as background. Lifting the lighting to replicate the feel of a film set was also a nice touch.

Programme & Publicity

There isn't much to say about a publicity campaign that succeeds in selling out a show well before opening night. Understandably the social media focus was on ticketing updates until there were no more tickets to be had. The rehearsal photos also gave a nice insight, and the stunning production photography by **Ashley Meerloo** gave those who attended a fond memory of the night, and showed those who couldn't get a ticket what they missed.

The programme was clearly laid out and easy to read, in a lovely design by **Jenna Rogers** with headshots from the camera of **Stephen Hewitt**. The inclusion of the About NODA section makes it eligible for the NODA programme competition.

Summary

This was an absolute joy of a show from start to finish. Every production element excelled, and worked together to create a delightful experience that was even better than the sum of its parts. Audience acclaim was justified and so vociferous that the show could easily be restaged next year and run for multiple weeks – there is little doubt that audiences would happily come back and bring plenty of friends. I extend the heartiest of congratulations to the entire team.

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