



Society : Centre Stage
Production : Grease
Date : 16 November 2018
Venue : Bridewell Theatre
Report by : Carly Hilts and Simon Jones

Show Report

General

Thank you for inviting us to this absolutely joyous production of Grease. Exuberant energy and real feel-good emotion, combined with strong singing and knock-out dance skills – what more could you want on a Friday night? We also liked the classic 1950s tunes that played while we were waiting for the show to start – they helped set the scene for the show, and they were a lot of fun too – we could tell the audience was enjoying them, the women next to us were singing along!

Players-Leading

Laura Ellis showed great dramatic range as ‘Sandy’. In her early scenes she was breathily innocent (but not at all passive!) and then just grew and grew as a character. Her rendition of ‘Hopelessly Devoted to You’ was a real highlight of the show – extra kudos that she made this famous song entirely her own, singing it with very individual inflection and style. The ‘Sandra Dee reprise’ was also very affecting – Laura has almost a country tone to her chest voice that is very clear and soulful. Beautifully sung, well done.

As ‘Danny’, Charlie Smith had a tricky path to tread – this is a role in which he had to portray an individual who is super-assured with his gang, but endearingly flighty and shy when he is first reunited with Sandy – and he achieved both very convincingly. Charlie sang with conviction, and was always interesting to watch on stage.

Jarrold Hawn’s ‘Kenickie’ was entirely convincing as the leader of the pack – a super-cool characterisation who seemed much more worldly than his fellow T-birds. He had a great line in impassive stares, as he watched Rizzo playing up – and some great singing in ‘Greased Lightning’, his interpretation of this ever-popular song did not disappoint.

As ‘Doody’, Will Hunkin gave an eager and immature characterisation that was very endearing to watch – combined with great comic timing. We really enjoyed his preening in ‘Magic Changes’ – his performance throughout this number was very funny, and we also loved his swooning fangirls! – as well as his lovely smooth singing voice and fab belt at the climax of the song. We had previously been impressed by Will’s singing in the Mic Drop cabaret earlier this year, so it was lovely to see him rocking his stuff again in Grease. He also had some really lovely stage chemistry with Frenchy – as a pair, they were the most believably of the right age (it’s easy to forget when watching Grease how young the characters are meant to be!).

Speaking of ‘Frenchy’, Frances Nicholson gave one of the most rounded and well thought out characterisations of the night in this role. Her Frenchy was sweet and ladylike, with a breathy little voice that was a mix of Marilyn Monroe and Audrey from ‘Little Shop of Horrors’ – a striking contrast to the other Pink Ladies. We enjoyed her wide-eyed innocence in ‘Beauty School Drop-Out’, as well as the lovely klutzy characterisation to her dancing – but when she was given the chance to dance ‘properly’ she was very impressive – her upside-down splits in ‘Born to Hand Jive’ made me gasp.

I have always felt that the real love story in 'Grease' isn't between Danny and Sandy, or between Rizzo and Kenickie – it's Jan and Rump! In these roles Charlie Houseago and Ashlie Kenyon-Evason gave us a partnership that was heartfelt and heartwarming. As 'Rump', Charlie's singing combined lounge idol smoothness with Frankie Valli falsetto. Meanwhile Ashlie's Jan was another beautifully conceived characterisation jovial, kind, and endearingly dorky, she was utterly believable and we loved how she sits like a teddy bear,

Jon Haines ('Sonny') and Kate Winney (Marty) were another effective partnership. Jon's urgently frustrated, one-track-mind portrayal had great comic effect, and we really enjoyed Kate's confident delivery of 'Freddie my Love'.

As 'Rizzo', Danielle Orlans brought bags of personality, sass, and emotional depth to the show. 'Look at Me I'm Sandra Dee' was sung with loads of attitude and humour, and was very committedly acted – though this occasionally came at a cost to the clarity of the lyrics. To a lesser extent this was the same issue with 'There are Worse Things I Could Do' but this was also sung with huge feeling, and Danielle's portrayal, the first time we are allowed behind Rizzo's brash façade, was very moving. A well-rounded and very convincing characterisation – well done.

Support

What an amazing ensemble! There was not a weak link in the whole piece, with every character well individualised, and not a step out of place. This was a tight-knit team who never let their energy or their characters drop, and they were all clearly having an absolute ball.

Among the other named parts...

As 'Eugene', Lewis McKenzie gave one of the most complete and consistent characterisations of the whole show. He was a constant joy to watch – always interesting, even when in the background – and although the role is something of a stock character, he never pushed the caricature the wrong side of cartoonish. Funny and endearing, he made us smile a lot.

Alexis Rose's Patty Simcox provided a perfect complement to the above - perkily upbeat and just the right side of annoying (we mean that in a good way! A great character and source of frustration to the Pink Ladies, yet never unlikeable), she was a well-realised character and a consistently funny presence on stage, and provided a brightly jolly contrast to Emma Leaver's surly 'Miss Lynch'. The latter's wonderful nasal voice was perfect for the character – an authoritative and amusing presence.

Glen Jordan gave a scene-stealing turn as 'Teen Angel' – lovely singing and great comic timing, with fabulous scary attitude from him and his back-up angels in the final verse of 'Beauty School Drop-Out'. A masterclass in how to make a relatively small role one of the most memorable moments of a show.

As the gum-chewing and predatorily prowling 'Cha-Cha', Yvette Shiel also gave a beautiful capsule role, bringing a fully-realised and very vivid characterisation in a fairly short space of time. Her dance moves were also flawless – very impressive indeed.

Speaking of dancing – we'd also like to give a shout-out to Emily Goodman and Arbie Baguios for their great featured dancing in 'Rock and Roll Party Queen' – absolutely arresting stuff.

This side of 'Operation Yewtree', the character of 'Vince Fontaine' carries an extra edge of menace – but James Newall was nonetheless a charismatic presence, as interesting to watch as he was toe-curlingly persistent in his pursuit of Marty. He was also well balanced by Chris Folwell as the engagingly smooth 'Johnny Casino' – very good comic timing in an enjoyable performance.

Director

This was a vibrant, well-characterised and very well thought through production – credit to Stuart James (who also had a hand in the set, according to the programme) for working so hard with his cast to create such a well-rounded ensemble piece. Everyone on stage was interesting to watch, with each individual doing their own thing, representing believable personalities, even when they were only in the background of a scene. Excellent use of space too – the Bridewell isn't a huge performance venue, but this was a tight and very dynamic show.

Musical Director

MD Hayden Taylor headed a very tightly rhythmic band who created a consistently great sound. The singing was also very well-rehearsed – not a note or a harmony out of place that we noticed. Bravo!

Choreographer

Samantha Herriot and Vanessa Forte have created an ambitious – and frequently acrobatic! – range of movement for this talented cast. The dancing was full of attitude from the first steps of the opening number (we thought the reveal of Danny and Sandy within this song was very nifty too), with wonderful 1950s details and a real variety of steps. Their high-energy interpretation of 'Greased Lightnin'' with flips and all sorts from the boys, was a particular highlight – we really enjoyed their stomp-like routine with bits of chrome, and very much liked that they left the famous arm sweep to the very last chord – a nice tribute to the original, but they made this iconic number very much their own.

The gradual build of 'We go together' made us want to get up and join in, and we loved the 'Hand Jive' and the school prom – especially how individualised and 'in character' different individuals' dancing was. This was an exuberant production, and everyone was clearly having a ball – positive energy that really rubbed off on the audience; watching each dance number was a simply joyful experience.

Stage Management

Headed by Emma Morgan and assisted by Nathan Long, stage management was slickly done. Scene changes done by the cast, who remained in character, and were quick but entertaining. Aided by a simple set, they managed to avoid the collisions and slow transitions (due to the shallow wing space) that we have seen other productions at the Bridewell fall victim to.

Speaking of the scene changes, these were mostly done in semi-darkness, but one (before Frenchy's party) was done in the light and it was so full of nice character moments that it made us wish the others had been the same, we're sure we missed lots of lovely acting – kudos to the cast for keeping up their energy and interesting characterisation even in moments like this when they were not designed to be seen.

Sound

Designed and operated by Stu Sound, sound was generally well balanced and effective, but there were a small number of occasions when the band was in danger of overwhelming the singing – 'Summer Nights' and 'Beauty

School Drop-Out' were particularly noticeable examples of this. But all in all it was a well put together sound, and very enjoyable too.

Lighting

Designed by Stuart Gain, the show's lighting was hugely effective – the blinding flash at the very start of the show was certainly attention-grabbing! However, there was the odd moment when the rigging seemed to be slightly off (or the set/actors may have been off their mark?) – for example, in 'Sandy', when Danny stood on the car bonnet his face was in shadow. The snap black-outs that ended each number made for very effective transitions, though a couple felt just a little too abrupt – we would have loved a fraction longer to enjoy the tableaux struck at the end of group numbers – but that's a small complaint in an otherwise great lighting design.

Set Design

Designed by Stuart James and Tina Torbey, this was an edgy set with a junkyard feel, the wings concealed with sheet metal and chains. It was sparse but effective, defining different spaces in an efficiently minimalist way through, for example, piles of tires that later became a (rather precarious!) bed in Marty's bedroom, or a locker representing the school. This cleverly left lots of space for dancing and made for very quick scene changes, but for all this simplicity the different settings were still all well defined. We also enjoyed quite how shonky a car Kenickie's beloved 'Greased Lightning' was!

Costumes and make-up

Wardrobe maestro Geri Huytan has put together a colourful costume palette that really captured the spirit of the 1950s. We especially liked this production's take on the Pink Lady jackets – they were not batch-bought pink satin like in the movie, but much more realistic customised denim – they looked convincingly home-made. All the characters were distinguished well – period-appropriate without looking like fancy dress, and each with individual touches to reflect their personality. There were some gorgeous Act 2 dresses for the prom, too – I (Carly) wanted them all! Some great hair-styling/wigs too – Rizzo's in particular was fabulous.

Programme

This was a great programme that felt professional standard – it contained so much for the audience to read beyond biographies, from interesting background information on the musical/historical period (and discussion of the show's ending) to an interview with the creative team. The design was smart and consistent throughout – we liked the car diagrams, and rehearsal photos are always very enjoyable – it felt well-made and very good value for money. You might like to think about entering it for the Programme and Poster competition, details of which can be found on the NODA website www.noda.org.uk

Front of house

Thank you for the lovely warm welcome – everyone was very friendly and helpful, and it was nice to chat to producer Hanna Umlandt before the show. We really enjoyed this production – and we could tell the whole company did too! Keep up the good work, and we look forward to seeing you again soon.

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