

THE BOYFRIEND

This highly stylised production of Sandy Wilson's tongue-in-cheek pastiche of life at a finishing school in the South of France in the 1920s by Reading Operatic Society delighted audiences at The Hexagon, Reading last week. The simple boy-meets-girl scenario, given a novel twist when it is finally revealed that the boy in question is actually a member of the aristocracy and the girl is the daughter of a millionaire, gave Tony Slevin (Tony) and Tania Pratt (Polly) an opportunity to both sing the romantic duets and dance their way to the show's happy conclusion in fine style.

Rediscovering the romance they had shared many years earlier, saw impressive performances from society stalwarts Maggie Preston (Madame Dubonnet) and Keith Lawrence (Percival Browne). Milking every opportunity afforded by the humour contained in their roles as members of the British upper class, Raymond Burton and Yvonne Maynard (Lord and Lady Brockhurst) were outstanding in their portrayals of the aging randy aristocrat and his prudish wife. Stealing every scene in which they appeared, two younger members, Jenni Simmonds (Maisie) and Harry Goff (Bobby van Husen), energetically sang and danced their way through the show, excelling with their versions of the Charleston in Act 1 and a mock Tango in Act 3. The principals received excellent support from members in cameo roles and the strong chorus at the heart of this society. In the capable hands of director Jill Morgan, the production fully deserved the appreciation given by the audience.

David Jackson

The Boy Friend

Better the second time around

Reading Operatic Society: The Boyfriend, at The Hexagon, from Tuesday, September 26 to Saturday, September 30

Seven years ago I reviewed Reading Operatic Society's The Boyfriend at the Hexagon, directed by the husband-and-wife team of Jill Morgan and John Lawes, so I returned for a second time with a feeling of déjà vu.

Amateur societies often repeat shows in a short space of time, usually for their box-office potential. The danger is that people will be cast in the same parts, so producing a clone of the original, but R.O.S. avoided that trap.

It is hard to believe that Sandy Wilson's charming '20s pastiche is now more than 50 years old. The script, written by the composer himself, still sparkles and the music captures the era well. There was a youthful feel to the first act as we were introduced to the Perfect Young Ladies, completing their education at Madame Dubonnet's Finishing School in Nice.

Tania Pratt, reprising her role as Polly Browne, impressed as always with her assurance on stage.

Among her schoolgirl 'chums', Emma Curtis was a delightful Dulcie, while Madcap Maisie was portrayed by the outstanding Jenni Simmonds, partnered by Harry Goff as her would-be beau, Bobby Van Husen. The latter couple had a rapport seen at its best in the dance number 'Won't You Charleston?' as well as an amusing Carnival Tango in the ball scene.

In contrast, the older members of the company were led by the returning Maggie Preston and Keith Lawrence as Madame Dubonnet and her erstwhile lover Percival Browne. Their combination proved even more delicious this time around. Their scenes and songs together were a comedy masterclass, highlighted by the teasing 'You-don't-want-to-play-with-me blues number.

The other standout partnership was Lord and Lady Brockhurst, (Raymond Burton and Yvonne Maynard). He was the stereotypical upper-class 'dirty old man' in tweed jacket and plus-fours, at his comic

The Boy Friend

NODA REPORT

On Tuesday 26th October 2006 I was pleased to be invited to review Reading Operatic Society's latest presentation "The Boyfriend" at The Hexagon Theatre, Reading. This is a truly English musical which one can sit back and be thoroughly entertained, as I was on this Tuesday night. It had been well cast with three of the principals playing the same roles as they did in the 1999 presentation. All the cast had been well rehearsed and in particular, the stylised movement so necessary in this production. We also had a good chorus, with excellent choreography, what more could one wish for!!

Lori Janke - (HORTENSE) - To start a show onstage by yourself is no easy task as you have to gain the audience's attention right at the outset, which is normally easy enough when you have a full chorus, but is a different matter when alone, but one needed to have no worries, this character being in the safe hands of Lori. Her interpretation of the French maid was spot-on with a well sustained accent throughout - Well done.

Tania Pratt - (POLLY BROWN) - This was a beautifully stylised performance by Tania. Her movements, facial expressions, diction and projection was all of a very high order so that she made 'Polly Brown' come to life and so very reminiscent of the 1920's. Vocally, Tania lent her excellent singing voice to such numbers as "I Could be Happy With You", "A Room in Bloomsbury" and the sorrowful number "Poor Little Pieffette", all sung with great expression - Congratulations, a super performance.

Jonni Simmonds - (MAISIE), **Emma Curtis** - (DULCIE), **Samantha Fields** - (FAY), **Helen Wigmore** - (NANCY) - I have combined these four ladies together as there was nothing to choose between them. Each gave a lovely interpretation of English girls at a French finishing school. Their movements were nicely stylised in the 1920's fashion, and each presented their own individual characters, bringing out all the inherent humour. These four ladies sang well with good diction and projection with a well sustained accent from all four. Movement about stage was controlled and the choreographic routines were very well danced - Congratulations to you all.

Lee Anderson - (PIERRE), **Kevin Goodfellow** - (MARCEL), **Andrew Phillips** - (ALPHONSE) - These three gave a good interpretation as 'Latin Lovers' with expressive gestures and facial expressions which fitted their characters to perfection and there was nothing to choose between them. Here we had good movement and diction, again with good stylised accents which were well maintained, and the interplay between these three and the young ladies from the 'Finishing School' was well presented - Well done.

Maggie Preston - (MADAME DUBONNET) - Maggie can always be relied on to present an excellent character, irrespective of the part she is playing and this was no exception. Maggie played the same role in the 1999 production with the result she carried off this role with aplomb. There is nothing more I can add except - Congratulations

Harry Goff - (BOBBY VAN HUSEN) - A good characterisation by Harry of the brash American rich boy with a well sustained accent throughout. His singing voice fitted the part like a glove with well sung 'Won't You Charleston' and 'The Riviera' blending well with 'Bobby' and 'Maisie'. His movements, particularly the choreographic routines were well danced - A good performance.

Keith Lawrence - (PERCIVAL BROWNE) - Keith made a good 'Percival Brown', father of 'Polly', being suitably unbending and concerned for the welfare of his daughter at the finishing school, but at the same time being concerned that she wasn't targeted by fortune hunters who were after her considerable wealth. His surprise at meeting 'Madame Dubonnet' was well portrayed together with the fact that she managed to get him to unbend. Keith played this same role 7 years ago when he was good then but on this occasion I felt that he had improved the character - Well done.

Tony Slevin - (TONY) - Tony played the part of Lord Brockhurst's long lost son very well. His feelings towards 'Polly' contained all the various emotions and he presented a well sustained 'upper crust' accent throughout.

best when trying to seduce Dulcie in *It's Never Too Late To Fall In Love*, while she was his dragon of a wife, desperately aiming to keep him in check. The audience loved it.

Company numbers such as *The Riviera* added colour and movement, accompanied by a tight orchestra conducted by Tony Wythe, doing a fine job with the baton as a last-minute replacement for the indisposed John Lawes.

On leaving the theatre, I was reminded of the Sondheim song *I Never Do Anything Twice*. Fortunately, on this occasion, Reading Operatic Society decided to ignore that advice and produced a show that was definitely better the second time around.

TREVOR DEFFERD

Newbury Weekly News



Review: The Boyfriend

It is 1926 in the South of France and love is in the air at the Villa Caprice, the stylish School for Young Ladies, as this season's must have is a Boy Friend. Did the girls charm AF Harrold enough for him to wish he could be one of them?

The Boyfriend, the Hexagon, Tuesday 26 September 2006

This delightfully jejune little piece of musical theatre succeeds wonderfully on its own terms.

It perhaps lacks the bite of the last thirty years of musical theatre, say the verve of the *Rocky Horror Show* or the *Little Shop Of Horrors* or the gravity of *Fiddler On The Roof* or *Sweeney Todd*, and it lacks the authenticity of the pre-war musicals such as *Bitter Suite*, but taken in its context as a piece of post-war entertainment it makes some sort of sense.

The plot is as thin and inconsequential as they come, never quite as convoluted or paradoxical as W.S. Gilbert would have made it, and is essentially the vehicle in which a parade of more or less related songs arrive, and there's hardly a duff song in the line up. From the title song through *Charlestons*, waltzes and comic numbers such as *It's Never Too Late To Fall In Love* we are treated to example after example of the sort of tune that Coward tossed off by the dozen – and wonderfully – with hints here and there of Porter-ish melodies and even a whiff of Kurt Weill in the fancy-dress ball finale.

And even if the lyrics never quite match what Noël or Cole might have done there are still some ditzzy and quirky rhymes and lines to make you laugh.

The Reading Operatic Society have done a great job here, the set is simple but perfectly effective, the singing is uniformly fine, the actors do the best they can with the script in-between the songs, but I think we all know it's exposition and filler until the next song come along, the orchestra is in tune, in time and enjoyable, but the real stand out facet of the show is the dancing.

Jill Morgan has done a brilliant job devising and teaching the choreography and the cast have done a very fine job learning the moves. From Tony Slevin's solo dance partnering a parcel, all the way up to the massed chorus and principals of the finale and encores, there was precision, intelligence, life, enthusiasm and character in every single routine.

It was a pleasure to see an amateur company in the first place attempt some challenging choreography and even better, in the second place, to see them pull it off so consistently well.

Even if you'd prefer a show where the plot isn't light as gauze and the characters weren't sketched in caricatures, this show, simply on the strength of the singing and most especially dancing, is a must-see. Like a lemon mousse it's harmless and quickly melts in your mouth, but leaves such a dear, sweet memory.

"Like a lemon mousse it's harmless and quickly melts in your mouth, but leaves such a dear, sweet memory."

AF Harrold

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Diction and projection, both speaking and singing was excellent with his singing voice blending well with 'Polly's', particularly in the two main duets "*I Could Be Happy With You*" and "*A Room in Bloomsbury*" - Well done.

Raymond Burton - (LORD BROCKHURST) - Ray's interpretation of the elderly, lecherous Lord with an eye for the young ladies was a joy to watch. He achieved the right body language which was sustained throughout coupled with some excellent facial expressions. His duet with 'Dulcie' "*It's Never Too Late*" was a showstopper - Congratulations on a great performance.

Yvonne Maynard - (LADY BROCKHURST) - It was good to see Yvonne back on stage again after far too long an absence. Her portrayal of 'Lady Brockhurst' could not have been bettered being the stern, long suffering wife, keeping a very sharp eye on her wandering husband. An excellent characterisation - Well done.

Tanya Beaney, Abigail Clarke, Barbara Moore, Jennamarie Smith - (GIRLS) - These four girls gave good support as pupils of Madame Dubonnet's finishing school with good stylised movement throughout.

Garry Morris - (GENDARME and WAITER) - Two nice little cameo roles well filled by Gerry with a good contrast between the two characters.

Guests - This group i.e. the chorus gave a very good account of themselves.

There is not a great deal for the chorus to do in this show, but what there was was well presented by this chorus and in particular 'The Riviera' when the whole ensemble are on stage. The dancing and singing of this number was precise and certainly had an impact in the opening of the second part of the second act - Well Done.

Jill Morgan - (PRODUCER and CHOREOGRAPHER) - Once again you came up trumps Jill. This production was as good, if not better than the 1999 production. It certainly had been well cast and the principals and chorus had been well drilled in the mannerisms of the 1920's.

Choreography was of a high standard with all the routines fitting the period and music precisely and I was particularly impressed with 'The Riviera' which filled the stage with precise movement and colour - Congratulations.

John Lawes - (MUSICAL DIRECTOR) - The cast had been well rehearsed in the music with a good balance of voices and good entries, singing the music in true 1920's style. The orchestra consisted of the right number giving a good balance for the 1920's music, unfortunately occasionally the brass and percussion were a little too loud and drowned out the principals on the night of my visit.

Stage Manager & Crew - A well managed stage with no apparent problems. Scenery setting was quick and quiet.

Lighting Design and Operation - An excellent lighting plot which ensured the right atmosphere was generated for the numerous scenes. The operation on the night of my visit could not be faulted.

Sound - The sound was adequate and appeared well balanced, unfortunately the orchestra was inclined to be on the loud side which drowned out some of the principals.

Costumes - (Haslemere Wardrobe) - Overall, this was a good set of costumes. They were all in period, looked clean and well pressed. Some of the gentlemen, particularly in the chorus, were not wearing braces to support their trousers with the result that they did not hang properly, looking bunched up, particularly from the front.

Scenery - (Proscenium Ltd) - This was an attractive set of scenery from this supplier. It reflected well the 1920's. It had been well painted with good perspective, was colourful and added much to the overall excellence of the show.

Properties - A good set of properties. They looked good, fitted the action and in keeping with the period displayed.

Make-up - Make-up had the right colours and styling for the 1920's. It had been applied well and stood up under the stage lights. Character make-up had been well devised and looked authentic.

Programme - A good programme with all the relevant information and items of interest, all printed on good quality paper. Cast photographs had been well re-produced and it had an eye catching cover.

Front of House - As always with this society, excellent front of house staff, smart, easily identifiable and helpful to their audience.

Thank you for inviting me to review your latest production and for your excellent hospitality, which was much appreciated.

Henry Hawes - NODA Representative - Region 13