

Annie Get Your Gun - Chelmsford Amateur Operatic and Dramatic Society at the Civic Theatre (28th September)

Review by Cheryl Rogers

This is an old show, with music by Irving Berlin and first performed in 1946, however this production uses the 1999 Broadway Revival version and CAODS certainly brought it back to life. It is the story of Annie Oakley who became the star attraction of Buffalo Bill's Wild West Show after winning a shooting match against the show's resident sharp shooter, Frank Butler. The love match that developed from this association is perfectly true, the remainder of the story being mainly fictitious.

From the outset the look of this production was eye catching and immediately catapulted the audience into the show biz world of travelling entertainers. The sets and costumes were full of colour and there was plenty of diversity. There were cowboys, dancing girls, all the varied characters that make up a travelling show and even a full tribe of Indians who provided some comedy moments of their own. The band was excellent and at just the right level of volume, although I'm not sure that having them on the stage throughout the show was actually a benefit, even though I can see that this enabled some of the action to be played further forward onto the extended apron. Of course the music score is splendid. This show is full to the brim of well known songs – 'Doin' What Comes Natur'lly', 'You Can't Get A man With A gun', 'They Say It's Wonderful', 'I Got The Sun In the Morning' and more. Not forgetting the most famous of all 'There's No Business Like Show Business' and its many reprises, making this a very long show but worth it to hear this fabulous music again.

First I must express my appreciation and congratulation for the superb performances of the two key principals. Claire Carr as Annie Oakley was simply amazing! When she first made her entrance, looking and sounding completely unattractive, with her exaggerated face pulling and cringe making hillbilly accent, I thought I wasn't going to enjoy her performance. I was wrong. She was magnificent! Within minutes her humour and guilelessness shone through and she made this character totally endearing. I salute her ability to keep the accent going throughout the whole show, just making subtle changes in her speech and manner to reflect the improvement in Annie as she grows in confidence. She was funny and tough and sang each number with conviction. I especially liked her rendition of 'I Got Lost In His Arms'. Her love interest and the main male in this show was Frank Butler, played by the ever popular Richard Harrison. He was a pleasure to listen to, such a fabulous voice and not so much of a hard, arrogant Frank Butler but a far more likeable version and much more amusing. A tall man with great stage presence, his sardonic grin and relaxed attitude was a fine match for Annie's feisty personality. This pair made a formidable duo. They played the comedy to the hilt and seldom have I seen a musical where the principal characters have had such chemistry between them. 'Anything You Can Do' was a triumph!

It would be remiss of me not to mention other members of the cast who did a grand job, Kevin Richards as Charlie Davenport (the manager of the show) kept all the action moving, Thomas Harper as Tommy Keeler and Jill Gordon as Winnie Tate, the singing, dancing knife thrower and his assistant, provided the young love element and many other good supporting characters all helped to make this a rounded and thoroughly enjoyable show.

Copacabana will be their next production in February, if you like musicals I urge you to go along and enjoy an evening that won't break the bank but will leave you with a warm glow inside.

Photo by Christopher Yorke-Edwards