

Titanic The Musical - Chelmsford Amateur Operatic and Dramatic Society at the Civic Theatre
(27th September)

Review by Cheryl Rogers

It has been a long summer break for me, having been busy directing a show myself and I wasn't at all sure what I thought about my first review of the season being 'Titanic the Musical.' Seriously? A *musical* about a disaster so well known and during the year of its centenary? So, I arrived at the Civic theatre knowing there was a possibility I could end up watching a disaster on stage too, after all; no enormous liner, no sea and no two thousand passengers and crew, just how convincing could they really make this story? I should have known better, this was CAODS and directed by Ray Jeffery, who knows just how to strike the right balance when dealing with an emotional storyline.

Right from the opening, we were introduced to the cast of passengers and crew and the scene was set. The musical numbers followed each other in quick succession as the various classes of passenger boarded the ship until the company swelled to a whopping sixty people on stage and culminated in the powerful 'Godspeed Titanic' song. This is a show without the usual small handful of principals but with every person in the cast having a character to play, all based on the actual people who sailed on that ill-fated voyage. It was quite apparent that each member of the cast had taken this responsibility seriously, never resorting to over playing the character or to capitalising on the emotional potential to 'go over the top'. They were sensitive to their interpretation and it was all done with dignity and respect and with amusing moments thrown in to lighten the mood.

There are few solo numbers as this show as it is an ensemble piece where the singing, for the main part, is shared with everyone. However, I do feel that special mention must go to some members of the cast. John Sullivan as Thomas Andrews, the designer of the ship, was especially memorable frantically sketching amendments to the flaws in his original design, as the ship went down. Mick Wilson as Captain E J Smith was well cast as the man who took the ultimate blame for making the decisions that cost the lives of more than fifteen hundred people and Barry Hester as J Bruce Ismay, the owner of the ship, had the unenviable job of playing the only truly nasty character in the piece. The touches of humour, when they came, were gentle as befitted this tragic tale, many being delivered perfectly by Diana Baker as Alice Beane.

This then, was a cast that totally believed in the characters they were playing and so we believed in them too. It was obvious that the cast were all completely immersed in the drama that unfolded and despite knowing the story so well, we were also drawn into their plight and their helplessness. By the time the act one finale arrived when the ship struck the iceberg, we were waiting on the edge of our seats as the painful sounds of creaking and crushing metal resounded around the auditorium. How impressive to achieve that suspense when everyone in the audience already knew what was going to happen. The effects created by lighting and smoke as the ship went down, with the desperate men seen in slow motion through the dim light as they succumbed to the water, were inspired and the epilogue, when statistics were delivered by the survivors, was spine chilling. It was all a measure of a tale well told.

So, returning to my initial thoughts - no liner but the effects more than compensated, no cast of thousands but sixty people in fabulous costumes and in full voice made it seem so, no raging sea but the orchestra created the soaring sound of giant waves in this powerful music score. Many congratulations go to the company and their director for staging such a magnificent performance. As you can tell, I was amazed by this massive undertaking, they put many professional companies to shame.