

I am not normally a fan of concerts, preferring to lose myself in the dramatic unfolding of a good story but something happened on the Civic Theatre stage that had me riveted throughout. Firstly, the sound and lighting was superb and the balance between band and singers was just right, with band never overpowering the singers as so often can happen. The six piece band was on the stage located in front of a half-moon silver backdrop and formed the centre piece of the evening, so that there was never a bare stage even when members of the company were in the wings. Secondly, despite strict observance of the rules regarding copyright, the “costumes” of the company were always interesting, with black dresses, trousers, shirts dressed up or down with ties, scarves, hats and even funky glasses, which were clearly coordinated with the lighting plot and meant that the overall impression was appropriate. Thirdly, the choice and variety of songs was such that everything was fresh and modern; even though Joseph and Sound of Music have been around 40 years these medleys did not seem out of context. Finally, before I comment on the highlights of the concert, the whole company seemed to be having a ball, with movement and energy not normally seen at a concert. This was clearly due to strong direction and the desire to keep the pace moving along, so much so that there was often little time to applaud before the next number began. Performers who didn't hear applause should be reassured that this was not due to a poor performance. With 33 separate numbers but at least 20 different soloists I cannot comment on them all so must begin by praising all who took part. Appreciation of music is a deeply personal thing and so I will touch on my highlights while acknowledging that others may have their own personal favourites. After the fun and easy familiarity of Joseph I was moved to tears by the Billy segment. The simple poignancy of a young boy's letter to his dead mother was very moving, while Electricity elicited a different but no less powerful set of emotions as we heard Billy explain his feelings when he dances. Great stuff! No chance to regain ones composure in this set as the miners threatened by pit closures sang “Once We Were Kings”, which was quickly followed by The Letter Reprise. Thank heavens for a break from the heart-rending as the Jersey Boys set took us through a range of well known songs from the Tamla Motown era (I think; my pop history is hazy). The beautifully sung power ballad “Wind beneath my wings” segued into a wonderful Hairspray medley. Sally Ratcliffe was outstanding in Good Morning Baltimore, easily as good as the original Tracey Turnblatt I saw on Broadway but of course not as large! Three more great numbers from Hairspray completed the first half. The second half began with a traditional medley from Sound of Music, followed by Summer Loving from Grease. Then another one of those moving moments began. Peter Smith sang a simply wonderful “You Raise Me Up” and was joined by Rebecca Bishop to complete one of the best numbers in the show. Wicked was an excellent segment, probably demonstrating more than any other segment how the power of lighting and simple but effective accessories (Peter Smith had clearly been through Elton John's spectacle cast offs) can be very powerful. Sarah Porter's Popular was great – not easy to sing a zany song without being allowed to establish any character beforehand. Il Divo was a revelation. This was a very brave thing to attempt because it could so easily have been a fiasco but on the contrary it was superb. Not content with four part harmony they chose to sing one number in Spanish – respect! The Finale was a great selection from We Will Rock You and after tumultuous applause the company finished with what seemed like an encore of My Way. This was a truly superb concert and in writing this review I was in danger of running out of superlatives.