

Chess The Musical , CAODS

Performed at the Civic Theatre, Chelmsford, September 25, 2009

Director – Sallie Warrington, Musical Director – Patrick Tucker

I had been looking forward to seeing Chess, having enjoyed the West End version twice, and was desperate to see how an amateur company would cope with the famous video wall, slanting stage and giant warrior chess pieces, never mind the amazingly high pitched vocal lines. That these should be my abiding memories of a show more than twenty years old was more a tribute to Trevor Nunn's budget than the essence of a musical which, in CAODS' production, was no less exciting despite having just one video screen (albeit a giant one), no slanting stage and the few games of chess actually played with just inch-high pieces. CAODS' set was highly stylized and evocative of a chess tournament, with giant flats of chess pieces interspersed with checkerboard and a diagonal "chess" motif. A sliding door at the back, with giant video screen above, was the single grand entrance/exit and the only piece of set that moved. Large props, such as the bed and tables/chairs, pole dancing cages etc were quickly brought on and off stage as the different scenes evolved and smaller props, together with lighting and costume changes, were sufficient to change the scene and mood. The video screen was used to great effect, even when not being used to show Budapest's invasion or Trumper's commentary, the diffused red light seemed symbolic of a dominant Soviet Russian presence with a hint of Orwellian big brother thrown in. Even before the front tabs rose and the set unveiled the overture brought the musical memories flooding back. This was a wonderful score that was brought to life by a very strong orchestra. It was, however, slightly too loud throughout, particularly during the underscoring, making dialogue almost impossible to hear. Friends in the audience, who were sitting at the front, back and in the balcony all commented on the sound. For those in the balcony the sound was fuzzy; for those in the front it was dominated by percussion and for those at the back simply too loud. This was a shame and the only criticism of a great production. I had forgotten just how important was Florence, who was the object of both Trumper's and Sergievsky's affections. Florence, played by Sarah Barton, was simply sublime. Pitch perfect and with a range of emotions that encompassed anger, regret and bitter sadness sometimes within the space of a few moments, it is impossible to heap too much praise. I wasn't convinced that the wig was necessary, assuming the photograph in the programme is accurate but apart from that she was outstanding and never dogged by the sound problems that others suffered. The two chess players, Sergievsky (Gareth Barton) and Trumper (John Escott) were well matched. While Trumper was edgy, arrogant and driven Sergievsky was cool, controlled and thoughtful. Trumper's Pity the Child , moved me to tears and Sergievsky's Anthem was also powerfully affecting. Vocally, these were hugely demanding roles and both acquitted themselves very well indeed. John Sullivan's Molotov was highly convincing as was Diana Baker's Svetlana. Strong acting skills were displayed by Ben Martins' Arbiter and Sean Quigley's Walter de Courcey, both of whom also had strong voices. The Civil Servants were enormously enjoyable and allowed us some comedy in what was an otherwise intense production. The six dedicated dancers were excellent and the choreography lively and refreshing. The chorus seemed to have plenty to keep them busy and offered a good variety of tableau, shapes and supporting movement to the dancers. I loved this show. It was slick, fresh and exciting. Congratulations to all.

Reviewer- Stewart Adkins

Posted 3rd October 2009 by [Stewart Adkins](#)