

Company full of verve and attack

Calamity Jane COADS at the Civic Theatre

Calamity Jane at the Civic Theatre is no calamity but it's not one of the best Ray Jeffery productions we've seen from the Chelmsford Amateur Operatic and Dramatic Society.

My programme tells me that it was adapted by Ronald Hanmer and Phil Park from the stage play by Charles K. Freeman after the Warner Brothers film written by James O'Hanlon with lyrics by Paul Francis Webster and music by Sammy Fain.

About the only people who appear not to have had a hand in it seem to be Davy Crockett and General Custer. Since the latter would not have stood for any slackness it's good to report that the company is as full as ever of attack and verve and provides a colourful and lively piece of entertainment.

They're still having trouble with their scenery. It seems that no piece of canvas can descend without removing a table or drunkenly swaying. There needs to be considerably more rehearsal of the action which links scenes which deflates an audience completely after the terrific build-up worked for so hard and effectively in the preceding scene.

However, it's good to report that the costumes are outstandingly good, worn with a swagger and impressive panache; and that the sets bring a whiff of the Wild West to downtown Chelmsford. The Calamity Jane orchestra is conducted by Gerald Hindes and provides excellent support for the large cast.

Pam Medcroft plays rootin'-tootin' Calamity, the Deadwood stagecoach driver, the thigh slapping, gun-totin', bullwhacking daughter of the Black Hills of Dakota. It's an enormously difficult role.

Perhaps there was not enough variety in the first half of the show (which is as much the writers' fault as any) but the later scenes, when it was not necessary to overcome the enormous forces ranged behind and around her, were touching and effective.

Brian Churcher was not very wild in his role of Wild Bill Hickock but he sang melodiously and brought a certain presence to the Golden Garter Hotel.

Angela Jenner was an entertaining Katie Brown, a stage-struck young lady who made it to the boards and Simon Fisher was as bright as a military button as the fresh-faced young lieutenant.

Peter Smith strolled in from the East Coast to trip the light fantastic and tap his way to stardom as Francis Fryer and very good he was too.

Energetic members of the company impersonated a variety of other Western types including the obligatory group groping under the skirts of the incumbents at the Golden Garter. You would have liked humming along to The Deadwood Stage, Windy City, The Black Hills of Dakota and My Secret Love and enjoyed the rhythm of the Indian dancers.

I understand that for their Diamond Jubilee production next spring the company will be presenting Fiddler on the Roof.

JON RICHARDS