

Sweet Charity, 25th September 2021

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Sweet Charity, played by Cassie Estall, almost immediately lived up to her namesake with the cracking opening number *You Should See Yourself*. Her free-spirited energy and will to love and be loved in return smothered her current coolly portrayed beau, who in return for her adorations, swiftly barges her into the river. The chaotic 'rescue' and less than dignified 'dumping' of Charity by the canal surrounded by busybodies and do-gooders in well-timed slapstick humour set the bar and pace of this fresh, energetic production.

The barely there sets, but for strategically placed furniture and minimal props, allowed for scene changes to be slick, clever, and pace never dropped. How clever was the Ferris wheel set and open plan wardrobe in Vittorio's bedroom, but more of him later.

Lighting was used to its full advantage, with bare sets eliminating pesky shadows and dark spots, and we were treated to a wonderful vibrant pink hue, silhouetting the ladies of the Fandango Ballroom in typical Fosse style akin to Chicago and its incarcerated leads. The power and strength of the sisterhood of these women is on the cusp throughout the show, clearly in the peak of their game, but held back by society and the feminist movement still in discussion rather than full action. So much did the audience want the whole troupe to revolt, stand together and walk away, but instead the *Hey Big Spender* number, delivered with grimace, resentment and frustration to have to perform for the gentlemen show us the difficulty of rebellion and the money so relied upon to get by now their names, were 'tainted' due to their place of work. Charity's friends Nickie and Helene, played more than ably by Katie Doran and Joanne Quinney, provided us with the grounding of Charity's spirit, and represented the opinion of the masses – there was no escape but to dream.

The fiery and jealous Ursula, played by Helen Meah, was cast perfectly against her towering and dramatic boyfriend Vittorio, by Gareth Barton, whose stage presence and singing voice filled the auditorium. Wonderful humour and melodrama was played out during their falling out, and consequential reunion, much to the disappointment of Charity, stuck in the wardrobe after failing to seduce the great 'actor'. This scene was delivered perfectly and with slick and well-rehearsed timing, with perfect juxtaposition of set and social standing. The end of Act one with the introduction of Oscar's panic attack in a lift (acted with such pace and comedy) left the audience wanting more. Introduced as bumbling, sweet and a little hopeless, Michael Bardo playing Oscar against Charity's similar nature gave us such hope that this time would be different for. How wrong we were.

The very popular song *Rhythm of Life* in Act two took the audience to another scene of New York in the 1960's; full of crochet waistcoats, flairs and head scarves, whilst worshipping their leader Daddy Brubeck (played by David Everest-Ring) in a wonderful, hippy trip. Full of hope and ambition, Charity rides the waves of love and potential happy ending, before Oscar reveals his true opinions of Charity's 'questionable' career and decides he cannot continue the pretence that he is fine with it. The ending came quietly, abruptly, and jarringly. Not the happy ending one wanted for Charity, but perhaps more realistic. Will she continue to try to find a man, or take the steps to happiness on her own?

A note of the choreography, the dance numbers were slick, well executed and a treat. The costumes were perfect, from the ladies dresses and bouffant coiffure, to the gentlemen's tailored, pinstripe suits. The supporting cast were equally as vital to the lead roles, and performed as tightly in dance numbers and smaller roles. The songs were delivered well balanced with the live band, and pitch perfect. The only note I could give was some of the accents were slightly dropped in the crowd scenes, and I could not decide if the narrative was necessary on the background projection. I found myself reading instead of watching on occasion and missed a few funny moments.

This was a fabulous production, and the first show I have managed to see all the way through in too long a time, so thank you for an uplifting night out. Hopefully we will see audience numbers increase over time as we remember how much talent and opportunity there is out there.