

Calendar Girls The Musical

DATE	11th May 2023
SOCIETY	Chelmsford Amateur Operatic & Dramatic Society
VENUE	Chelmsford Theatre
TYPE OF PRODUCTION	Musical
DIRECTOR	Robyn Gowers
MUSICAL DIRECTOR	Rachel Plunkett
WRITTEN BY	Gary Barlow and Tim Firth

Report

Author: Christine Davidson

For their second production of the Season, CAODS presented Calendar Girls The Musical with music by Gary Barlow and Tim Firth. Having seen the play in the West End when it first came out I wasn't sure if adding music would improve a very funny, emotional play but by golly it certainly did. From the first moment when John (Gareth Barton) came on his own to sing and was joined by the cast singing 'Yorkshire', the stirring sounds of their voices made me realise that we were in for something special.

Calendar Girls is based on the true life story of the Knapley Women's Institute (WI) who decided to raise funds to buy a new sofa for the Skipton General Hospital, relative's room. Annie and her best friend Chris persuade their fellow members to pose for a nude calendar to raise money in honour of Annie's late husband John, who had died from cancer. This was much to the dismay of Marie, the WI Chairwoman.

Robyn Gowers, first time director with CAODS, is to be heartily congratulated on a superb achievement with this production. Finding the right actors to play these real life people is a hard job but each and every person on that stage was right for their roles. She had a very clear vision and had worked hard to make a sensitive piece, of what is a serious subject. Her vision gave light and shade, a roller coaster of laughter, joy and sadness but in the end having the audience giving a well-earned standing ovation, which apparently they have had

every night with their full houses. Robyn really cracked it with this show. Congratulations Robyn, you gave each and every one of us an evening to remember for a long time.

I had been warned that this show would tug at the heart strings, as like an awful lot of people, including my partner and I, we have been through the challenges of cancer. To say that I started crying in the first half when John gets worse with his chemo and finally dies is an understatement, it left me in pieces. What a performance by Gareth Barton, who played John and Christie Hooper playing Annie his wife. The love portrayed by this pair felt so real and natural. Christie like Gareth has a beautiful voice and was on stage the whole time. The heart and soul that this couple put into their acting performances was superb. The naturalness as they told their story was joyful and painful, strong and powerful so that in the end you wanted to go up and hug them.

The clever set design allowed for various entrances and exits giving the impression of the fells in the distance. Having people walk down the hill into the huge area of the stage was ingenious, as was the opening of a huge flat to make the WI village hall. All the props and movement were seamlessly done by the cast and crew so it flowed naturally throughout.

Every one of the cast showed the depth of character and on stage comradery needed. You felt the friendship of all the cast involved and at the end when they took their bows, they just got together, hugged and cried just as we did. What a powerful piece to be a part of; absolutely wonderful.

Anyone who has seen Calendar Girls knows just how vital the friendship of Annie and Chris has to be. Diana Easton as Chris was the superb friend and supporter of Annie, boy what a voice she has. Great accents both of them, the friendship that was shown between them felt strong and real. Diana Easton as Chris was simply brilliant. She shone on stage with a huge stage presence. Good for her to strip off at the end of the first half asking 'if anyone could see her nipples!!!'

Cora (Debra Sparshott) the single mother of a teenage boy who had been raised by her father, a vicar, was excellent. Her different rendition of Christmas Carols was extremely funny, she really rocked it out to the audience with humour and fun with her song 'Who wants a silent night?' A very brave lady to strip off with her back to the audience whilst playing the piano.

Rachel Curren portrayed Marie, the leader of the WI, as the prissy, very stiff upper lipped, bossy leader really well. Marie was determined to maintain a good image for the group at the risk of alienating herself. She found it hard to control her daughter Jenny, who had been sent packing from boarding school; she tried hard to get her to conform without success. Rachel was perfectly cast for this role. Her clarity of speech was wonderful as with all the other actors you could hear every word.

Young Charlotte Broad was a great choice for the role of Jenny. Bolshie and brash at the beginning but we see her mellow as she gets close to Danny (Hayden Wagland). Danny with his best friend Tommo (Wylie Queenan) made up the three teenagers on stage - they were superb, all three contributing to the humour of the piece. Danny and Tommo's song, 'Girls/Hello Yorkshire, I'm a Virgin' worked really well. I can see great futures for all of them. Total confidence and very natural. Well done all three of you..

Stephanie Yorke Edwards as Ruth gave a splendid master class in acting, while sitting on her own with her Russian Friend, the Vodka bottle. Sad and lonely, in an unhappy marriage, doing favours for people to fill in her life she made me cry once again with her rendition of 'My Russian friend and I' Again a very brave lady to strip off with the aid of the vodka, what an empowering scene for them all.

Caroline Escott as the sexy Celia, certainly had the assets that this character needed! Her funny clever song 'So I've had a little work done' was super and when she stripped off the wonderful line of 'We are going to need bigger buns' was obviously very true. Caroline oozed sex appeal and obviously was enjoying every minute on the stage. She used her flirty ways with comedy timing and made this role a really fun one for us all.

Maggie Burgess as retired school teacher Jessie had some wonderful lines which she delivered convincingly. Her rendition of 'What age expects' obviously resonated with the more mature ladies in the audience.

We must not forget the two tea and coffee sisters Caroline Froy as Miss Wilson (Coffee) and Karen Whitehead as Miss Wilson (Tea) who came on at the end with just mugs covering their breasts, to a rousing cheer from the audience. Also the cameo roles of Lady Cravenshire (Jean Pinkney) who looked absolutely fabulous in a super outfit; she suited the role well and Fae Goldsworthy as Brenda, who comes to give a talk at the WI until the projector blows up. Each of these roles greatly enhanced the production.

They say behind every great woman is a supportive man. This male cast were no exception. Each actor brought something special to their performance and gave the production the driving force it needed. Congratulations to Oli Budino (Lawrence) as the photographer, Kevin Richards as Rod, John Sullivan as Denis and David Slater as Colin. Strong performances from all of you. Well done.

Musical director Rachel Plunkett and her orchestra of seven did great service to the whole of the show, never once over playing, this was excellent. Lighting was on the whole fine but sometimes the lighting cues were a tad early with the actors in the process of entering but overall it was good. Sound was very good, with clarity of speech from all actors.

Costumes were mainly the casts own and very suitable for the time period. Props were well thought out, this show certainly had that special feel of a fantastic production.

The ensemble worked, totally supporting the lead actors, so special congratulations to Katherine Eastaugh, Turshia Park, Susan Parkinson, Helen Quigley and Catherine Youngs.

With the last song of the evening 'Sunflower of Yorkshire' we realised we had witnessed a superb production, full of friendship, hope and love. The feel good factor was given in spades and the roar of the audience as they all stood to applause was so well deserved. I went out sobbing with such emotion to be met by the lovely President of CAODS Gill Plumtree who as always looks after us so well. I don't think I was the only one drying their eyes as they came out of the auditorium!

The society was collecting for Blood Cancer as one of their dear members Lynette Sullivan had recently passed away.

If I had the time I would be there again tonight, as I don't think I have enjoyed a show so much for a long while. It is one that will be remembered for a long time. Thank you all for such a wonderful evening.

Christine Davidson

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