

NODA Review – Made in Dagenham

CAODS have a reputation for producing top quality musicals. With a huge pool of talent to choose from they can tackle the big shows and most certainly pull them off. I will be honest, Made in Dagenham is not a musical I particularly enjoy, I find much of the music quite hard going although I have a lot of respect for the story itself. Having said that there are some memorable moments.

I can only imagine how difficult it must have been for Director/Choreographer Claire Carr and MD Clare Benson during the audition process with so many skilled performers to choose from when casting this show. Absolutely essential to the success of this production is it's leading lady Rita O'Grady and the production team nailed it selecting Keeley Denman for this role. Note perfect throughout with great comedic timing and an ability to switch from comedy to emotional depth seamlessly, it was a joy to watch this talented lady on stage. Keeley should be proud of herself for making this demanding role look easy. I was extremely impressed, a faultless performance.

Supporting her Oli Budino as husband Eddie had some nice moments. Left to look after things at home while Rita leads the Ford strike, including the children played beautifully by Millie Denman and Matthew Lyn, he showed his frustration with his wife while still very much being in love with her. Eddie has a very emotional song in Act 2, "The Letter" which started well but for me it got a little shouty towards the end. I would have preferred a gentler approach to show case his singing better.

A solid cast of supporting Actors ensured the big numbers in the show packed a punch. (I wish these performers were credited more in the programme). With Rita all the way her best friends Beryl (Kirstie Fisk), Clare (Sophie Lewis), Sandra (Lauren Byford) and Cass (Cassie Estall) worked incredibly well together. Their friendship was believable despite their personalities being so different. Kirstie was hilarious as the potty mouthed Beryl leaving the audience in stitches and Sophie gave an endearing performance as Clare, I particularly enjoyed her song "Wosname". Lauren looked sensational as the sexy Sandra and danced well. I did find some of her dialogue difficult to understand, I think her mic may have been too quiet. Hopefully that was just on the night I watched. Cassie as Cass was great as the more sensible of the bunch, although I think the costume change into a Pilot uniform at the end is historically incorrect...

Excellent portrayals from David Slater as Harold Wilson with his comical parliamentary aides making the most out of their stage time and Robyn Gowers as the formidable Barbara Castle. Robyn had one of the most challenging songs in the show but pulled it off with her usual flair. A special mention also to Caroline Escott who was lovely as Connie Riley. Her scene with Rita in the hospital was expertly done. Sadly her solo number didn't impact as it should have with so much going on on stage at the same time although she sang it well. I also took issue with Rita sitting on the hospital bed after Connie's death, it felt a little inappropriate and distracted

from the emotional dialogue delivered so well by Kevin Richards as Monty, Connie's long time admirer.

As mentioned earlier I'm not a huge fan of the music in this show with the exception of a few standout numbers. "This is America" was a highlight led confidently by Michael Lambert as the vile but very funny Tooley. "Everybody Out" was a great end to Act 1 and "Stand Up" led by Rita was sensational. But my favourite has to be "Storm Clouds" which was absolutely beautiful. Incredibly moving with the entire cast singing in perfect harmony. A goosebump moment.

The ensemble singing was exceptional throughout with the men in particular making a wonderful sound. This was a heavily choreographed production and I didn't see a foot out of time amongst this huge cast. Well done everyone.

The set was huge and not credited in the programme but I assume largely hired in. The scene changes did look like hard work and it appeared to be all hands on deck to manage them as best as possible. Credit to everyone involved with this on and off stage.

Costumes were great, in keeping with the time and the hair styles were also spot on. I loved the change of the factory girls into the red coats for the Liverpool contingent. Simple but really effective.

Sound was mostly well balanced with no late mic cues that I noticed, just a couple of mics could have been turned up a little louder at the beginning. Lighting was a bit of a problem with the front of the stage being very dark meaning the audience couldn't always see the faces of the performers as they delivered their dialogue. There also seemed to be issues with the spotlight either being in the wrong place or the Actors not finding it – I'm unsure which.

The band were excellent led expertly by MD Clare Benson and this combined with the ensemble vocals created a rich, beautiful sound.

Claire Carr has obviously worked hard on this production and in less experienced hands it could easily have fallen flat. I think what impressed me the most was the attention to the message that was being delivered. And as always, CAODS delivered with energy, skill and a passion for what they do.

Congratulations to all involved, I had an enjoyable evening and as always left feeling lucky to see so much local talent at Chelmsford Theatre.

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