

Director: Iain Fowles MD: Peter Allanson
Choreography: Paula Geere, Stephanie Milton, Iain Fowles

Court Theatre, Tring

23rd – 27th November 2010

Follies is a strange show – as are many Sondheim's. It is difficult to get the cross-over between the young Follies girls and their beaux, and the older versions at the reunion. But I think Iain Fowles managed to convey the relationships between the old and young very well.

The set was well thought-out, but I thought the lighting left a bit to be desired – there were several places where performers weren't lit, and the stairs didn't seem to be lit very well.

The stairs themselves seemed to be quite challenging for even the dancers, as they were all a bit reticent when using them – but they were nicely set, and gave the stage dimension – I just think they could have been used more.

I liked the opening routine, it used the overture well, and set the scene, although it was a little slow for the dancers, who sometimes struggled a bit to keep their balance.

The costumes were very colourful and in keeping with the various era's of the action. There were a couple of ladies who needed a bit more bling – particularly Daphne Watts as Emily Whitman in the very striking pink and black halter-necked dress – who perhaps needed gloves and something in her hair, plus bigger more noticeable jewellery.

Sharon Allum as Stella Deems did a very good version of Who's That Woman – a favourite of mine – and looked the part, but her hair needed more fullness at the sides, and less floaty bits, as to me it didn't suit the dress or the era, although it looked nice.

The band at the back of stage was not an unqualified success, as the monitor was on the ground in the centre of the stage – and to see it the singers had to look down – which was a shame, as inevitably they occasionally lost concentration or the meaning of the music, as Sondheim is so difficult on the timing.

I think the Society realised that this was perhaps a mistake, and although it is difficult to place a band at the Court theatre, I am sure something can be worked out – other Societies must have a solution, and it isn't always possible to place monitors at the sides, at a decent height, because the framework is curved, and might not be stable enough.

The band, under the direction of Peter Allanson had a good sound, and I thought it was very suited to the music, they did not try and outdo the cast, but provided good accompaniment and a swell of sound when they needed to. A good mix of musicians, even if they were obscured from view!!

Justine Ephgrave as Sally Durrant Plummer has a lovely voice, and her rendition of Losing My Mind. was beautiful – very touching and tuneful. I wasn't convinced by the dress in this number – it didn't seem to be in keeping with the character, although it was very 'Follies'. I liked her relationship with Stephen Davies as Buddy her husband, frustrations boiling over from both of them – and also the softer side with Ben as her one-time lover. Nicely achieved.

I could see the reason for Sally's main dress being as it was, but it seemed too plain and simple against the other ladies, it had to be flowered to adhere to the script, but for me it just needed to be a bit more striking.

Malcolm Foster gave us a sometimes charming Ben Stone, but for me sometimes needed a bit more oomph in his darker moments! However, he showed the varying sides of his character well.

Buddy was a nice comic character, something Stephen does well, but he also showed us he has a very good singing voice, and put over his songs as if he was born to them. I particularly liked the emotional ending to The Right Girl.

The younger Ben – Andy Faber - was well-cast, and he looked the part as the young charmer, exploiting the young Follies girls. I was a little perturbed to see his grey suit trousers poking out from under his white trousers, not a good look – perhaps he should have tucked his grey trousers into his socks to stop them showing if he had to wear them underneath, but otherwise a good characterisation.

I thought Sophie Bowlzer as the young Sally was lovely – she has the type of face that lights up when on stage – and somehow as an audience member you are always with her and responding to her. She also looked the part.

Gisele Yoh-Fowles as Phyllis Rogers Stone looked absolutely beautiful in her swathed dress, and her hair was just right for the character – she gave us a sound portrayal, with her under control but undisguised bitchiness. Her put downs and attitude towards her husband Ben were excellent.

Phyllis's number with the girls was nicely choreographed, though there were a few placings that could have done with tidying up – again I wasn't convinced with the dress, which was the same design as Justine's, and as a dress design it was just one that I didn't like, although the colours were great.

Joy Hester created a charmingly dizzy Hattie Walker, and although she put over her song Broadway Baby well, there were some timing issues the night I was there, which again I think was due to the placing of the band.

Muriel Foster's costume for Heidi Schiller was very bright and elegant, it was just a shame that during her number with the young Heidi (Hannah Mason), we weren't able to see Hannah's face because of the lighting. I thought their voices matched well.

There were some nice cameo roles, which went to show the depth of experience the Society has.

There were a few places where the choreography needed tidying up – e.g. girls on one side were in a straight line, the opposite side in a diagonal line – and the first Follies dance was rather slow, which made it difficult for the girls to control – but on the whole I liked what they did, which suited the costumes and music.

So, all in all a good production, I still can't bring myself to really like the actual show – and I'm not one of Sondheim's number one fans, but BTC acquitted themselves well, and I was pleased to see a good audience, who appreciated the production and the performers.

Nova Horley