

MUSIC HALL. THE PLAYERS DRAMATIC SOCIETY. CHEADLE HULME. JANUARY 1982.

From the moment I was led to a seat by a table, offered peanuts, crisps and pickles, I suspected that it was not yet another pantomime that I was about to see! "Music Hall", I gather, was started by this enterprising group many years ago and other amateur societies followed their lead. This suggests that Cheadle Hulme Players must "know a thing or two" about this form of entertainment and what was to follow proved the fact. Before curtain UP we were visited by attractive waitresses (actresses all - in fact I spotted a Pygmalion Eliza), who took our orders for the "jar or two" to a brightly lit bar set in the side of the auditorium. This was managed by an Edwardian looking barman who participated vocally in the evening's proceedings. Music was provided by Eric Ward (Piano) who managed to sound like a "full ensemble". He was assisted by Vera Ward who, I suspect, did a lot more than turn the pages of music. Eric acted as straight man and foil to many of the performers and supplied pianoforte sound effects when required to. Actually it was worth the money just to hear Eric play!

The production in the hands of Eric Ward (what again) assisted by Alan Simpson, was full of pace, colour and variety. Although some of the numbers strayed from the Victorian straight and narrow, the spirit of "Music Hall" was there in plenty. The Choreography by Shirley Forton was worthy of a full musical and considering that apart from the three tap dancers, she was directing "acting types", I think that the final result was very good indeed.

The Décor by Beryl Burnett and Eric Barlow and construction by Jack Nixon and histeam, offered us a variety of settings for the ensemble routines. The Victorian bar cloth was nicely painted, the "get out and get under" car cut-out was most effective, I liked the picture frame idea for the duet and the Minstrel set was superb. (This and the car cut-out looked spanking new?) I found that the flowered inter tabs were a problem. Many of the girls had flowered or pastel shaded dresses which tended to "disappear" against these tabs. Single colour tabs, if you have them would have been more effective. I liked the "cut-out" people in period dress perched on top of the false boxes right and left of the "pros".

Wardrobe mistress Audrey Kinder, Hazel Barlow, Margaret Cole (and other "miracle workers" gave us a fine collection of authentic, colourful and even exotic (shades of Araby) costumes. The Minstrel outfits were particularly good, the men in sequin sparkling, white collared pink shirts and white trousers, the girls in gaily coloured gingham matching dresses. Their red and grey motoring outfits in the car number were also impressive. The ladies treated us to assorted costumes in period and in a variety of colours and the men wore their more subdued outfits with great panache. I think that the Tyrolean suits in "Deutscher Dog" were magnificent (shades of Sound of Music - or Novello at least).

The lighting plot was undemanding and there appeared to be very little opportunity for Geoff Hinde and Ken Cawley to stretch themselves. The chairman's lamp was rather modern and the picture frame duet could have done with a little "pinking" as they say in the musical comedy world. Otherwise everything was on cue.

Again, "props" were a bit thin on the ground but whatever was required i.e. assorted banjos, tambourines, a snake here and a baby there, etc., were "on cue and looking good".

Apart from the white face "clown" and the minstrels which were most effective, the make up (Muriel Goodwin and Marge Hime) was straightforward. I was pleased by the even and uniform make up of the chorus. So often one is treated to an assortment of base colours from jaundiced yellow to sunset orange but not here. My only note - Jasper could have been done with a "proper" moustache for the play - his pencilled in one was hardly noticeable.

Stage Manager Ollie Bowden assisted by Tim Harper and John Simpson ensured that the flow of events was smooth with only one hiccup to my knowledge.

The Players.

The opening chorus soon had our toes tapping with a selection of true Music Hall songs, featuring Peter Hime (a real Chaplin figure) asking us to "Put

him amongst the girls"; Debbie Burnett wanted to know where "Kelly" was and Sandra Hough (quite a personality girl) sang "Abe". The movements were good and the grouping effective. At this stage the only thing that was lacking was the "eyes and teeth drill" but that came as the audience warmed up. Shirley Forton sang "an old man's darling" really well but her costume belied her years. It was too mature, too matronlike, beautiful but more suited to Mrs Higgins in "My Fair Lady".

I thought that "your girl and my girl" rendered by David Wayne and David Williams was most amusing. Their polka faced delivery was just right. I must agree with the Chairman when he says that the next song is rarely heard as it was intended to be. That was put right almost immediately by Rosemary Clayton who gave us a most sensitive performance of "Nellie Dean". Rosemary's flowered dress was one of those which disappeared into the inter tabs.

We had that magnificent car cut out in the next scene complete with a suitably costumed and incompetent driver. He was fronted by three lads in blazers and three lasses in red and grey who lit up the theatre with "Get out and get under". The routine was full of movement and fun and the song was "belted" out to everyone's pleasure. Hilary Jarvis, Hilary Lloyd, Helen Ward, Geoff Bird, Rob Clayton, Richard Evans and Peter Hime enjoyed themselves as much as we did.

When a clown white face peeped out of the house tabs and looked us over, I knew that here was a performer who knew how to use an audience. Alan Simpson lisped his way through "Thuthie Thimpson" so effectively that we in the audience found ourselves doing likewise. It was very funny indeed and Alan made it look easy which it certainly wasn't.

Frau Inge Pollock (straight from Bavaria) emerged from the wings holding onto an extended dog leash - we couldn't see the dog - we never saw the dog - it was an invisible "Deutscher Dog". Frau Inge was joined by Eric Barlow, David Ward, Martin Whitworth and David Williams who executed a Tyrolean "slap and tickle" dance to the delight of all.

Act 1 ended with a full blooded Victorian melodrama which not only starred Jane Evans, Geoff Bird, Peter Hime, Jeff Wilson and John Simpson but members of the audience who hissed, booed, cheered and generally "gesticulated" in vigorous fashion. I suppose that there were as many actors out front as on the stage. The whole piece was gloriously funny.

Act 2 began with the chorus who "sang" standard limericks and then "performed" those submitted by the audience during the interval. These were "performed" with great panache which is highly creditable considering the "soft porn" offered up by the customers! (I gather that the very worst were consigned to the dustbin!) The winner was invited to stand up and recite his own verse - a nice touch.

Mr. Jeff Wilson, complete with helmet begged "Fireman save my child". His child got very little sympathy from the audience but he got plenty of applause.

There followed a delightful act performed with professional expertise by Richard Evans. He sang "the Baby Show" and played the banjo too. What an easy style he displayed and a most pleasing singing voice. Not content with his musical success he had hit on the idea of persuading a lady from the audience to sit on the stage and nurse his "baby". This, of course, provided the opportunity for a little comic patter. The inevitable song sheet came on and we all joined in the song.

Resplendent in a beautiful blue dress, Beryl Burnett bemoaned the disappearance of a gentleman by the name of "Bill Baily". Beryl was a real lady but the song needed someone from the "low order" - it is a Marie Lloyd type number. Still she sang it really well.

When next the tabs opened we could have been forgiven for thinking that "Wilson, Keppel and Betty" had returned to the boards but no, it was "Wilson, Wayne and Shirley" that is Jeff, David and Forton. Backed by a rather tired snake of uncertain species, they sang and sand danced "Old Bazaar in Cairo" (? from Salad Days?) rather well. In fact it was very funny and would have been even funnier if the two men had had "short tunics" as did their predecessors.

Inge Pollock shed her Germanic aura of Act 1 and joined Eric Barlow in a "romantic duet". The idea of the framed portraits which "came alive" was a

novel one. It was difficult for each to "freeze" whilst the other sang and a more subtle use of lighting would have helped here. They sang well and the whole thing was sensitively presented. Two notes - Inge should have been in blue not brown for "Alice Blue Gown" and was Eric's American accent deliberate?

The programme persuaded us to believe that we were about to hear a nostalgic song rendered (limb from limb) by one Don Humphreys. It did not prepare us for what was to follow. Don, or should I say Donna, for he - she - it was dressed fore and aft as a buxom beauty from Bramhall, treated us to an all too short ten minutes of fun. A stand up comic of no mean skill, he handled the audience with consummate ease. There were at least three jokes which were born out of that evening's news and that is real topicality. A superb comic.

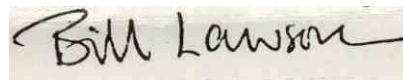
The last thing I expected to see in Music Hall, was a striptease act but nothing is beyond this talented company! Barbara Jay insisted that "I was a good little girl, till I met you" and every man in the audience felt with some shame that she was singing to him! What an incredible baby face expression of innocence and naivety as she cooed her way through the song to great effect and then - starting with her long white gloves, began to strip. This she did with great style and good taste until, down to her bodice and bloomers she popped behind a screen from whence she continued to tease us. Barbara really knew how to put this number over.

There was a "slap bang wallop" of a finale with a "Black and White" minstrel show, beautifully dressed and superbly choreographed. The full company including those smashing tap dancers and two banjo players, seized upon the medley of songs arranged by Eric Ward and had us all humming and singing with them. There was a lovely duet in perfect harmony by Eric-Barlow and Richard Evans. There was also a very fine singing voice in the auditorium belonging to a gentleman who greeted me on my arrival - Alex Anderson (casting committee - please note).

Principals always see their name in print but let me not forget the ladies and gentleman of the chorus who contributed so much to this show - congratulations.

I have left to the last the gentleman who held the whole show together on the night - I refer of course to "your own - your very own" Leslie Hill, who linked the acts together with his own brand of after dinner wit and humour. He combined the dignity of "Mr. Chairman" with the expert expertise of a straight man and foil. My only point - the pipe didn't quite fit in with the Music Hall image but after all, having to keep this lot in order demands a little stimulation.

Finally, I would like to thank everyone for their friendly welcome and hospitality. I think that you have a theatre to be proud of.

A handwritten signature in black ink on a light-colored rectangular piece of paper. The signature reads "Bill Lawson" in a cursive, slightly slanted script.