



Daisy Pulls It Off by Denise Deegan

Pendleton Sixth Form Centre, Salford

Reviewed by **Matthew Dougall** November 2017

Not just Daisy, but the students of Pendleton Sixth Form College's Centre of Excellence for Performing and Production Arts have pulled it off!

This is by no means an easy play to stage for various reasons; but the more obvious of which is that the play is set in a time and place that so very few of us still alive today will be able to recall. Indeed, how times have changed - the mannerisms, speech, demeanour, ethics, morals, in fact pretty much everything has changed (and not always for the better) since the play's setting of 1927, and the hallowed and distinguished halls of one of England's most reputable and established schools, The Grangewood School For Girls.

Here is both its greatness and its failing. Written in the early 1980s by **Denise Deegan** it was written not so much as a 'homage' to those days, nor was it supposed to be entirely historically accurate. It was more of a pastiche and sideways satirical look at the way those times have been immortalised quite wrongly in the writings of people such as Enid Blyton and others, making Girls' Adventure Stories seem thrilling and absolutely 'top ho!'.

The problem this gives directors and casts is to find out just exactly how real it can be played without it becoming a complete Mickey-take and therefore unwatchable; since the premise for this story is that it is a play within a play in any case. There needs to be a balance struck between obvious caricature and realism; a balance which has been struck superbly, cinematically, with a series of black and white films known collectively as The Girls From St. Trinian's (ignore the modern and awful remakes!). And in this regard a huge hat-nod to the late great Alistair Sim was laid before us this evening, as our very own headmistress was played by a male actor, who so rightly made only the smallest of attempts to hide his masculinity. Although only a small role, it was measured wonderfully by **Matthew Thomasson**.

The question is then, was this balance struck this evening? Yes, it was. I would have liked a little more comedy to have been found within the piece, but generally it was played with sincerity, creating believable and interesting characters.

Our protagonist, Daisy Meredith, the first scholarship pupil to attend this school, and therefore creating the story and her adventures, was played with pluck by a very likeable **Faye Heywood**. Daisy's best friend was played by a very excitable and giggly

Emmanuela Fadire

as Trixie, and their 'arch enemies', up to playing all kinds of girly tricks were a sour-faced side-kick Monica (

Gabrielle Wardlow

), and the mean, resentful and spiteful cock of the school, Sybil (

Kit McKiernan

). The friendly, and indeed trustworthy and honourable older hockey-playing head girls, Alice and Clare, somehow seemed too normal when surrounded by the other characters, but they made for a nice change of pace and a more reflective cessation between all the cavorting and adventures (

Amelia Ball

and

Pippa Greenhalgh

).

The school teachers in this production were for me, too far over the top, and thus were not as believable as the pupils and this was a pity. Extremely unrealistic sounding Russian and a French assistant, who would not have been out of place in 'Allo 'Allo sadly did nothing to give either a centred character. In general though an excellent attempt was made to recapture the essence and spirit of that time, with a good overall bash at the RP accent, required body language and gait. Costumes were also mainly good but more attention to period hairstyles would have been nicer.

I think my biggest concern this evening was the set. The idea of using two adjoining staircases to form a triangle with a podium atop leading to the headmistress's office was good; the practicalities of manoeuvring this cumbersome and noisy set though was not. I did like the idea of using it as the cliffs in the penultimate scene, but bringing these heavy and distracting pieces of stage furniture into place each time was off-putting and distracting. Further, the strange bowers adorned with very modern literature as flowers (?) around the proscenium arch simply didn't work at all, and was out of context and time with the rest of the production.

Directed by **Lucy Huntbach**, the play lacked a certain pace, and the setting of certain scenes left far too much for the audience to suspend their disbelief for. With some scenes being played in a Brechtian manner and others with much more earnestness, whilst a pool of light sufficed for one scene and then the staircases, complete with photographs, secret doors, and a library were used in another. The directing therefore was full of mixed messages. Fortunately the cast were not fazed by this and they produced a piece of theatre which was, despite my above criticism, extremely well realised, and full credit to all of them for doing their best with a piece of difficult (for 21st century teenagers) writing. Yes, the performers in this piece were between the ages of 16 and 18, and so bearing that in mind, I can only praise them all the more for their efforts.

However, the review would not be complete without mentioning another male actor in drag this evening. There was a pianist on stage serenading us with period and quite dramatic music to the start of each act, and this pianist acted as a kind of intermediary between us the audience and the characters on stage, ringing the school bell at the right time and playing the song in the music class. I have seen the talented **Joe Dillon** a few times now, and this is his most bizarre role to date. A cod Irish accent and a too-obvious wig didn't really help him though.