



9 to 5 - The Musical

Produced by The Arden

at Waterside Theatre, Sheena Simon College

Reviewed by Matthew Dougall December 2017

Students on the BA (Hons) Musical Theatre course at The Arden (part of Manchester College) perform for the public twice a year, and their choice of Musical always surprises me.

Dolly Parton's 9 to 5 was not something I would have expected a group of college students to have wanted to tackle, but tackle it they did and with such zest and shazam (not sure if that's a word, but you know what I mean)!

I have seen the film. I have listened to and seen on film the amazing Dolly Parton herself, but had not, until this afternoon, seen the stage show (despite it having been on 'the circuit' for quite some time). So, what did I think of it? To be honest, I actually liked the show very much and thought the way in which it was presented this afternoon was excellent, suiting the young cast as they learn and perfect their talents.

It utilised a large cast, and so I would imagine most if not all the students would have at least a little something to do in the show, and the directing by **Adam Philpott** was tight, slick, consistent, and made good use of both space and available talent.

The Musical, as you would probably expect, follows the story of the film quite closely, with music and lyrics, of course by Dolly Parton. It is the 1980s, and we are flies on the wall at Consolidated Industries. We watch the journey of three female employees of that company as they go from kow-towing, subservient menials, to the heroines and saviours of the company, whilst the nasty and lustful boss gets his justified comeuppance. It's a lovely feel-good worm-that-turned story with the added extra punch that it is a feminist, trailblazing show for equal rights.

However, the cast calls for one of these three women to play the part of Doralee - and although it isn't ever mentioned, it is quite obvious that Doralee is Dolly Parton, complete with, yes it has to be said, all the accoutrement associated with Miss Parton, and the Arden really pulled this one out of the bag in no small measure at all. **Holly Neaves** was wonderful. The voice, the walk and the mannerisms, all quite reminiscent of Parton, and she certainly was not afraid to 'stand out in front' either. Moreover it was not a caricature or tribute performance either, but a sensitively and excellently measured one showing real depth and skill.

Violet, a long-standing employee of the company, has her application for management rejected simply because she is female, and together with Doralee and new to the job and what it entails, Judy, not only dream of killing their boss, do actually try to do so (albeit perhaps by accident). They end up condemning him to a fate worse than death as he is sent to one of the firm's branches in Bolivia. In the role of Violet was **Ellie Hoban**, whose characterisation of the part was startlingly honest. Very little in the way of body movement, but an awful lot going on in the head and I was drawn in to this and it was superb. Judy was played with equal sincerity and aplomb by **Emily Porch**. I really loved her character development from innocent newbie who gets everything wrong to a strong, independent lady who knows what she wants - a life without Dick, her husband, who had run off with his secretary.

All three had great singing voices too, and their solo songs were just wonderful. It was a great shame that this afternoon there were a couple of problems with mics and sound levels - some of the dialogue was lost because of this, and one of the songs started far too loud.

The role of Franklin Hart Jr, the company CEO, who is, by his own admission, a sexist, hypocritical, lying, cheating, egotistical biggot was played with a certain unique style by **Luke Race**.

To be honest, I found him too likeable if that is possible. He had a lovely smile but I didn't believe the malevolence underneath it. I think the character needs charm, which Race had in abundance, and also needs power and authority without finding the need to shout; a quiet authoritarianism rather than blustery. I feel this would have worked better at the start and then could have been developed more into a shout as the show progressed and his character became weaker; a side that Race didn't show. However, it was still a great and enjoyable performance.

The stern 'spy' and PA to Hart, and secretly in love with him, Roz, was played a la Bond villain, by **Shanine Marie** (although sadly the glasses did tend to upstage her somewhat). And the mild-mannered employee in love with Violet, Joe, was played with ease this afternoon by a likeable **Matthew Staten**; whilst many others made up the rest of the company playing small cameos and chorus roles as necessary. The choral singing was excellent, and I enjoyed the costumes and characters.

The choreography I found very Curate's Eggish. Choreographed by ex-Arden student **Phil Town**, I found that when there was choreography working within the restrictions of the set, for example, 'Around Here', it was very stilted, disjointed and rather lame; however, in the numbers where the stage was bare and it was possible to do a full dance number, then it was great and very enjoyable. The set design was good, and worked well. I loved the idea of small desks on wheels to bring in for the office scenes, and the decor and office furniture was just right.

One thing I should mention though is the accents. I really feel that in this instance the cast would have benefited greatly from a dialect coach. Some of the speaking this afternoon sounded very British, and those who had a discernible US accent were not consistent with each other sadly.

Behind the set was a 10-piece band under the direction of **Robert Purvis**. They sounded superb this afternoon, and were given a much deserved and hearty round of applause of their own after their play-out music.

The Arden offers training in many theatre disciplines, and as this afternoon attested, they come from all over to study here. It is a great training ground right in the heart of the UK's artistic second city. Going on what I witnessed today, the standard is extremely high indeed, and I hope to be seeing some of these performers-in-training on a West End stage very soon!