



teur theatre

Society : Bishopshalt ODS
Production : 13 The Musical
Date : 7th December, 2019
Venue : Bishopshalt School
Report by : Tony Austin

Show Report

I'd heard about this show on Broadway some years ago with the unprecedented and fascinating idea of an all juvenile cast - surely a nightmare for the Licensing Authorities there and likely to preclude any professional production over here - so Thank You BODS for providing my introduction to it in what may well be its London premiere. I'd also seen claims that every member of that cast (at any rate on the first night) was aged 13, which if they were true perhaps helped to give that version a sense of immediacy but probably not the understanding of the rather older BODS cast inspired by Director and Design Guru **Nicole Burman** to look back at themselves when younger and deliver their outstanding performances. (And what a nice idea to get Staff Members to remember themselves when they were 13 and show the results on video in the foyer to entertain us.) I've also read that the show's original accompaniment was provided by an orchestra of teenagers, not something attempted by new Musical Director **Tim Robertson** (although his four-piece Band at the back of the stage did include his predecessor and at least one former pupil) whose fine training and rehearsal ensured confident and well-projected singing from principals and chorus alike, who only rarely found the Band too loud.

Starting in New York where young Evan Goldman was soon to have his Barmitzvah, Choreographer **Jane Gooch** and Assistant Choreographers **Rachel Briggs** and **Laura Goodman** got the whole cast dancing and celebrating as the youngsters getting invited to the party, presumably including the 13 (!) shown as Cheerleaders in the programme: **Lillie P, Belle S, Mollea D, Daisie H, Evie W, Amy S, Ruby F, Georgina N, Jazmin B, Eloise S, Georgina W, Chloe W** and **Ralitsa I** whose later *Opportunity* was very well taken with superb dancing, great work with their Pom-poms, fine lifts and a lovely tap sequence. Difficult to remember exactly when the elegant kick-line occurred, but they were certainly giving their all again at the end of the show in the spectacular brand new Curtain Call number *Brand New You*. Company numbers were also enhanced by Ensemble Members **Abhisyaant S, Daisy A, Mishal M, Andreea S, Cian L, Jaanvi T, Olivia R, Keira S, Martha E, Gemma H** and four others (see below) all of whom also featured as part of the school groups in Appleton, Indiana, reacting well and adding background to the scenes there. Those four, **Rachel M, Amneet N, Laraib W** and **Abigail W** had a wonderful scene as (rather unusual) Rabbis when Evan sang centre stage about *Being a Geek*, with each of them at compass points around him doing classy dance steps on the spot and showing just how to put over individual lines before they moved in and combined as a more co-ordinated chorus.

With 13 (!) named roles in the show all described as Principals, there is no obvious order in which to mention them, so I begin with the innocent cause of most of the action, **Tema** as Kendra, worshipped by Brett and other male characters but provoking jealousy and vitriol from the girls. Her reactions to the horror film and to Brett's loss of nerve were well put over in *Any Minute* and the ending, finely timed to ensure no one kissed her, was hilarious. Happily for her, Brett was eventually coached as to what to say and they got together.

Next, we saw a great vindictive performance from **Imani** as Lucy, pretending to be Kendra's friend but in fact one of her rivals, and leading the *Opportunity* number brilliantly in song and dance to emphasise how she sought to replace Kendra in Brett's affection. And when she did, her complete dominance of him was demonstrated to his goons' consternation and our great amusement. Later, after Brett and Kendra had got together again, **Leah** as Cassie, **Caitlin** as Charlotte and **Kasey** as Molly combined with her in powerful fashion to spread malicious rumours carefully disguised with the words *It Can't Be True*, although it seemed that the three of them then revised their assessment of the situation to lead *Brand New You*, the glorious Curtain Call number.

Essential to any school story is the handsome and popular leader of lesser mortals and **James** as Brett well fitted the bill after his experience as Warner last year, although there seemed little likelihood of Brett having the character or skills to reach law school. Able with his authority to dictate who should attend the Barmitzvah, but needing help to decide how to approach Kendra, losing his nerve at the cinema and becoming putty in Lucy's hands, he seemed destined to be just a figure of fun until rescued by listening to Evan and Patrice, reproduced for Kendra from the inadequate notes on his forearm but still more than enough to restore their relationship. But I'm forgetting that he was only 13! His Goons were at first represented by a great double act of experienced **Shaunna** as Malcolm and young **Alice** as Eddie, obviously enjoying their change of sex and scoring equally with lines, of which "If I live to be 20 I'll never understand women!" is the one I remember. While when joined by **Ishan** as Richie and **Thomas** as Simon their despair shown and sung clearly in **Bad, Bad News** (at the thought of Brett and Lucy) was one of the real highlights of the show. As was an earlier exit, the four following Brett with each tongue working and sly glances at the audience!

Two real friends gained by Evan in his new home in Appleton, Indiana, *The Lamest Place in the World* according to **Natalie** as Patrice a neighbour (although it had got a bit better with his arrival) but so unpopular that if she went to the Barmitzvah no one else would. Amazingly no attempt was made to glamorise the character or her disappointment when her invitation was torn up (just another superb ballad about friendship). Her declaration that Evan was not *Good Enough* (after being ignored at the cinema) was happily replaced as they started singing *Tell Her* to give the advice Brett needed. A wonderful performance giving the show a basis in the gritty reality of life, in contrast to the school trivialities. And **Luis** as Archie, attractively cheerful and full of life despite the terminal degenerative illness which left him on crutches and dragging his feet, but also manipulative in using his condition to persuade Evan to arrange a date for him with Kendra in *Get Me What I Need* superbly clear and convincing. Evan's use of Archie's *Terminal Illness* as the way to get the cinema tickets was a great duet and *Getting Ready* for the event made a superb First Act Finale for them and all the Company. The actual kiss in the cinema, done perfectly in slow motion as Kendra leaned back, found her two neighbours in their seats with their eyes closed and their lips gently meeting, happily with no sign of a tongue, before all hell broke loose. Another amazing performance with really persuasive use of the crutches until the Curtain Calls where, crutches abandoned, we discovered that Luis was a dancer with a kick as high as the dancing girls around him and the only jump splits I have ever seen on the Bishopshalt stage, before he led the whole company in the sparkling celebratory Curtain number.

But the show was all about that other outsider from New York, Evan Goldman, rising 13, awkward and worried about his Barmitzvah and what life would mean after it and his parents' split-up, all put over brilliantly by **Callum** leading the opening company number from centre stage after introducing himself to us, and at the end of it being struck by the further blow of his mother's – and inevitably his – move to Appleton. Dressed in sloppy, ill-fitting clothes to emphasise his otherness (just one part of **Kerry Magee's** fine work with the show's costumes) his scene at Appleton with Patrice was very touching, but

did little to relieve his anxieties, so well shown, as her presence at his Barmitzvah would result in no one else coming. Nor did his adoption as “The Brain” after suggesting how to achieve Brett’s ambition, since it made him open to blackmail from Brett and then, rather more charmingly, from Archie. I was amazed by the ways in which Callum expressed and acted his anxieties as each further difficulty arose without ever sending them up or making them boring to us – completely realistically. His nervousness at the cinema over the three separate dates, again without exaggeration, pointed up what was happening and its humour, and happily his break-up with Patrice was only temporary, with the kiss she later gave him one of the few moments where he could express joy – with a perfect geeky smile and excited reaction so minimal that no one on stage would be aware of it. Going back to the *Being a Geek* number with the Rabbis, I noticed that when copying their steps he did so accurately and stylishly, and on the many other occasions when he was front centre singing with the Company behind him that he was able to pick up their steps as the singing stopped, and deduce that when he danced geekily it was deliberate. Great singing, superb acting and a little dancing as well, combined into a fantastic lead performance - amazingly Callum’s first on stage rather than backstage.

My thanks to everyone at Bishopshalt for another fabulous pre-Christmas treat, particularly **Nicole Burman** Director and Designer extraordinaire, helped in Props and Set production by **Kim Coles**, and Lighting Design, Set Construction and I suspect he very helpful Projected Backgrounds by **Terry Sharp** (Follow Spot Operators: **Dylan, Anaik, Shreya** and **Jessica**) with Michael Smith responsible for Sound Design and Operation. I shan’t repeat names mentioned in my earlier comments except for **Kerry Magee**, this time as Production Manager and Box Office together with **Claire Brown**, also looking after stray critics together with **Nigel Cockcroft**, whose team of **Jane King, Zena Bermingham, Suzanne Duff, Clare Berry** and **Irene Warnock** apparently combined other reception duties with the usual efficient Stage Management which always ensures that BODS shows run smoothly and we are never left waiting for the next thrilling scene.

Happy Christmas to you all!

Our NODA London Youth Adviser Annie Hertler-Smith saw the Friday performance and writes:

Thank you very much for a very entertaining evening and congratulations to everyone involved with 13 The Musical. On Friday night there were several 'stand out' performances and some really tight dancing and chorus work. It came across as a real 'team' effort. The principals all sung well and interacted well within their various relationships with some great comedy timing and facials. I was also particularly impressed with the various chorus groups dressing the stage during some scenes, all of whom had sub text/business throughout which they maintained in a subtle but meaningful way.

Wishing you luck with your future productions and I hope to see you again soon.

