



Society : Bishopshalt ODS
Production : High School Musical
Date : 3rd December, 2016
Venue : Bishopshalt School
Report by : Tony Austin

Show Report

I have to confess that this production was my introduction to the world of *High School Musical*, and what an introduction! The stage filling with girl cheerleaders, followed by the rest of the cast screaming the *Wildcat Cheer* of the High School in question, all doing their best with their singing to drown the seven-piece band playing at full volume as the girls demonstrated their professional dancing moves, including raising one of each group of cheerleaders on high (much more elegantly and for longer than on a Rugby field), all projected at us in the audience with confidence and delight, while around them the other pupils split up into their interest groups, each characterised with equal verve, with the Thespians, the Jocks (Basketball players, as I learned) and the Brainiacs being the most vital elements.

But every one of them had to dance in this production to choreography which used the stage and its facilities to the full with every possible pattern and formation from **Jane Gooch** (assisted by **Rachel Briggs** and **Laura Arnold**) running the full gamut from the genuine celebration of youth culture where the whole cast were *Bopping to the Top* as if on springs or in other numbers filling the stage with superbly artistic and co-ordinated movements of legs, arms and bodies, to the send-up of just the sort of theatre-mad youngsters who might be in an American Performing Arts School (though never of course in Bishopshalt), or when the Jocks were performing with basketball movements woven into their routine, showing ball control good enough to make us believe they were really Jocks (though I suspect there may be a brawnier element hidden among the Bishopshalt sports teams). Unfairly, I can't credit individual girls who at times in the dances performed cartwheels, at least one no-hands flip, a lovely jeteé or two and lots of brilliantly high leg work, although among the males, Dance Captain **Daniel Teague** was easily recognisable in the Jocks and when leading the breaks for the male dance team as well as when joining the girls for a high-kicking sequence. Principals were not excused, and those playing adults, with less dancing to do, still had great fun dancing their characters' ages, or when carried away (as we all were) at times as if they thought they could still do it like the kids. And when the numbers were rehashed in the huge *Megamix* finale the whole effect was even more breathtaking.

A lot of the quieter bits, while we in the audience got our breath back though the cast didn't seem to need any rest, were in fact send-ups of real situations which seemed to me cleverly pitched at just the right level and performed with enough variation to keep them humorous without becoming irritating. Perhaps the finest example was **Katie Harris** as Ms Darbus, young idealistic drama teacher showing first sternness over mobile phone use (needed to start the plot) but then both misdirection and emotional involvement, as well as inconsistency over auditions. Having her sit next to me in the aisle helped me to identify some of her comedy auditionees on stage (all being dismissed before their attempts could pall): **Drew Harris** as James, singing off key (after an earlier scene-stealing "shy" exit and a superbly prolonged imitation of a worm which had made most of us miss the action across stage); **Katie Chaplin** as Susan projecting well but too OTT; **Lizzy Bajegoo** as Ellen singing Bass and doing the splits; and other young ladies (**Julia Meanda** and **Ciara Conway**) nicely sending themselves up.

The longest and most OTT send-up was of Sharpay Evans, President of the Drama Club and lead in every previous school musical, where as brilliantly played by **Chloe Powell** she seemed impregnable, although she would have to tone down to be Juliet in the new musical *Juliet and Romeo*. Only the fact that Troy, our leading man, had found a girl for himself and was ignoring her ruffled her feathers. She showed how she really could sing and dance, and dominate her much taller brother and stage partner Ryan, played by **Karim Dennis**, at first as a characterless yes-man in her service with a fixed smile, although he cleverly managed to inject a feeling of reluctance into both his dialogue and his dancing to her choreography. Spurred by taunts into thinking for himself, he gradually gained the upper hand and even persuaded his sister to apologise, though she became distraught at the thought of losing the status her roles in the Drama Club and the dramas had given her. And his changed status without her in the final scenes was signalled by the girls crowding below him as he sang from the raised runway at the rear and catching him triumphantly (no mean feat considering his height) as he dived into their arms.

The Jocks, led with style by leading man Troy Bolton, consisted of **Kyle Prince** as Chad Danforth, loyally supportive of him throughout in every situation, **Marvyn Powis-Smith** as Zeke bubbling with enthusiasm in words, actions and facial expressions and walking off with Sharpay at the end despite decorating her with a cake (turned custard pie) by accident in the first Act, **Rodrique Burnett** as Jason, **Robbie Young** and **Bradley Hook**, all of whom took full part in the Jocks' superb numbers. **The Brainiacs** were well led by **Megan McCorriston** as Taylor McKessie with fine dialogue and considerable charm, showing both brain and acting ability when welcoming leading lady Gabriella into the group and devising the way in which the clashing events of the day could be subtly disrupted. Loyal supporters around her included, I believe, **Nicole Harrington** as Martha, **Lily Sutton** as Kratnoff, **Susan Gharti**, **Marisa Vasco**, **Samuel Wiltshire**, **Grace Edu** and **Iman Miller**. Even with the help of Wikipedia, I am afraid I can't be certain which others of the 54 names shown as Principals, Year 13 performers or Cast spoke, sang or danced in particular ways which caught my eye and deserve a mention - so may I just say to every one of them, well done, you were part of a great team!

Still identifiable are: **Jonathon Gilby** believable as Coach Bolton from the team of 1981, putting the Jocks through their paces, barking with authority at them to end a lesson and warring with Ms Darbus, adamant as to his son's place in the team and nowhere else, but eventually well playing his recantation as both did in their emotional reconciliation; and **Rosie Ferris** as Kelsi Neilson in a lovely performance playing straight and true as the shy writer/composer of the musical and becoming a sort of fairy godmother to our leading couple, convincingly miming playing her keyboard for them to sing *What I've Been Looking For* at the right slow tempo and being on hand (with her keyboard ready offstage) to accompany them again when they eventually re-auditioned.

What better continuation could there be to a teenage holiday romance, tunefully recollected in duet as the *Start of Something New*, than to find that by chance you both now belong to the same school? Roles gently and realistically played by **Ben Booth Bennett** as Troy Bolton (equally impressive in different mode as the leader of the Jocks) and **Olivia Brennand** as Gabriella Montez, a name which might imply Spanish exoticism but effectively interpreted here as a quiet young lady who didn't need to throw her weight around, letting all her talents speak for themselves, although she would need to audition to play Juliet in the show. Their rather shy observation of the auditions (and finding their fairy godmother) was beautifully played, and I was amazed when the second Act started not with music but a long dialogue scene for them alone, superbly acted and thoroughly touching (so good that we didn't really miss the huge hit *I Can't Take My Eyes Off of You*, normally sung then). Estrangement after the overhearing of only part of a conversation accidentally broadcast via a mobile phone being well sorted out, as were Troy's father's doubts and the clashing re-audition times, both love and musical theatre triumphed.

One CV not in the programme was that of **Ciaran Reidy** playing Jack Scott the School News Announcer (simply shown on the back page as “Voiceover” – although I don’t think he provided the other amplified voice of the unseen lady science teacher) whose beautifully styled announcements added much to our enjoyment and to the swift running of the show, which continued without any pauses as he bridged scenes. Other scene changes with brief written orchestral lines between them were as slick, with none needing to be repeated before the next scene was ready, and there seemed to be unusual communication between the sound and light desks, stage management and the cast when dialogue in some scenes started literally a second before we could discern any change in the lighting.

Congratulations to Head of Drama and Director **Chris Alaru** for a wonderful show and as the likely source of that innovation, plus the corollary of dialogue cues being picked up fast, while the dialogue itself wasn’t rushed but spoken clearly, meaningfully and with stage-presence. And to SM **Kim Coles**, ASM **Katherine Gammond** and their wonderfully efficient crew of **Aaliyah Thomas, Geena Jutley, Jodie Labrosse, Palak Arora, Rhoandra Edwards, Guneet Bansal, Pierette Okon, Nishtha Dogra, Magda Mazur, Rawan Alishwiki** and **Aleksandra Opacia** on always having the scenes ready. And to **Terry Sharp** and **Liam Why** with help from **Laura Arnold, Ian Goldsobel** and **Chloe Thompson** for the set construction, props and decoration to Chris’s design with a special word for **Rawan Alishwiki** (again) for the magnificent huge Wildcats logos on the back wall. To Terry again for the lighting design and his assistants on follow spots **Daniel Hill** and **Henry** and to the immensely busy **Michael Smith** on Sound, dealing impeccably with the amplified phone calls and voiceovers and the many personal mics as well as other frequent effects.

Stuart King’s professional Band, including pupil **Max Hardie** as one of the percussionists, made superbly loud music to raise the excitement levels and were equally accurate but less loud where necessary for us to hear the fine singing from the cast he had coached. While **Kerry Magee** as well as being a busy Assistant Director had also arranged the superb costumes which delighted us all evening.

Thanks to you all for another wonderful pre-Christmas evening treat from my wife and myself.

NODA London’s Youth Advisor, **Annie Hertler-Smith** who also attended the performance says: Congratulations on an excellent production and performance of High School Musical. It was full of energy and you clearly have some very talented dancers. I hope the cast and production team have a well-deserved rest and I look forward to your next production.