

Society : Slough Windsor and Maidenhead Theatre Company (SWMTC)
Production : **CHES**
Date : Thursday 2nd April 2015
Venue : Theatre Royal, Windsor
Report by : Gordon Bird, NODA Representative, Area 14



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Show Report

Having seen this show several times by different societies over the years, I was delighted to be invited to review SWMTC's musical *Chess* with music by ABBA's Benny Andersson and Björn Ulvaeus and lyrics by Tim Rice.

The first production was premiered in the London's Prince of Wales Theatre on 14th May 1986 and ran for nearly three years.

The story follows a cold war era rivalry between two grand master chess players, an America grandmaster and his Soviet Union challenger. Their battle is not just restricted to the chess tournament, however, as both men battle over a woman who manages one and falls in love with the other.

This production was wonderfully produced with some excellent singing, well rehearsed choreographed movements. The characters were very well defined and all produced a high level performance that I have come to expect from this talented society.

FREDERICK TRUMPER (**MATTHEW FILMORE**)

I have now been fortunate enough to see Matthew perform this role twice, and each time it gave me goose bumps. I never would have thought it, having seen an excellent portrayal of the American chess champion, but I felt this performance was even better! His singing was delightful, effortlessly hitting those high notes. His accent was consistently applied and his characterisation very well observed.

FLORENCE VASSY (**OLIVIA SHEPHERD**)

This was a very mature performance by Olivia as Florence, the American who falls in love with the Soviet chess player. Her acting, particularly in the final scene when Anatoly leaves back to the Soviet Union was exceptionally performed. I could not always hear her singing at the beginning owing to some sound issues but fortunately these were soon corrected and I was treated to some very confident singing. Like Ellie, her performance in *I Know Him So Well* was outstanding.

ANATOLY SERGIEVSKY (**EDDIE SPENCER**)

I thought Eddie was outstanding as the Soviet chess player, Anatoly Sergievsky. I thoroughly enjoyed his excellent singing voice, particularly in *Where I Want to Be*. Eddie did not attempt to overplay the Russian accent and this seemed to work. I believed in the chemistry between him and Florence and

the final scene was wonderfully acted. Overall this was an excellent performance, both acting and vocally.

MOLOKOV (NATHAN AUERBACH)

I have not seen Nathan perform before with SWMTC (I missed *Jesus Christ Superstar*) but have seen him perform for another society in this area. As with this last performance, his interpretation of character was very well defined and he gave a very thoughtful role of Molokov, the scheming Russian who manages the Soviet chess players. His singing was very well controlled and enjoyed his performance in *The Soviet Machine*.

THE ARBITER (DAMIAN SOLLESSE)

I understand that Damian is leaving in a few days to seek a professional career and I wish him every success. Based on this performance (and the many recent performances I have witnessed) he will have no difficulties. This was a classy performance, very different from any I have seen, and I loved those high heel shoes! His singing was very well controlled and his zany character worked perfectly.

WALTER de COURCEY (BAXTER BULLOCK)

The American delegate's representative was adequately portrayed by Baxter, a new face to SWMTC. Good accent and movement and his conniving was very well presented. Baxter possesses a good strong singing voice that complimented the balance of the other singers.

SVETLANA SERGIEVSKY (ELLIE WALSH)

This was a nicely portrayed role by Ellie as the wife of the Soviet chess player. Of course the highlight was *I know Him So Well* and Ellie did not disappoint, delivery a wonderful performance. Even more so considering both actresses were singing with their backs to each other, thus they were acting out their thoughts and had no-one to react with.

DANCERS

I was surprised that there were any dancers in this show, as there are not too many opportunities. However, these six dancers provided some excellently choreographed movements. I loved the opening sequence and the "cheer leaders" routines. I particularly enjoyed the very well rehearsed *One Night in Bangkok* dance movements.

CHORUS

The busy chorus treated us to some delightfully tight vocal harmonies and acted very well in their various roles. I particularly noted Charlotte who acted and reacted continuously as a reporter. The entrances and exits were very well observed and I particularly liked the impressive opening sequence with the introduction of the chess pieces. The volume was superb – I heard every word over quite a loud orchestra and a very large theatre space. I understand that there were some additional singers in

the wings, but, irrespective, it created a beautiful sound. There were several occasions where the action took place with the chorus in freeze, which can be quite difficult to achieve, but this was superbly observed by the chorus members.

DIRECTOR (SIMON WOODBRIDGE)

A good beginning sets the standard to what is to follow and I liked the simple staggered introduction of the characters onto the chess board during the overture. The style of the black and white being followed through even to the pom-poms worked and I liked the simple contrast between the Soviet red outfits and the plain white and black for the Americans. Colour was then used for other characters such as the dancers in Bangkok. All of the entrances and exits were very well defined and movement was all very well rehearsed. The characters were understood and were appropriately developed. It looked very well cast indeed. The production ran at an excellent pace (not rushed) with no awkward pauses or any scene change glitches – ensuring a very smooth production.

MUSICAL DIRECTOR (AMY BINGHAM)

All of the singers produced an accomplished performance and the balance of voices was superb, with all of the different tones blending very well indeed. I have to compliment the work that had been achieved on the phrasing of the principals as all of the words were heard. There were a couple of unfortunate microphone issues, particularly with Florence early on, but I could still just about understand what was being sung owing the time spent on the vocal delivery.

CHOREOGRAPHER (SARAH SEABROOK)

Sarah produced some very imaginative routines for not only the six dancers but all the other performers. The robotic/chess like movements were perfect for the production. All of the dancers executed their routines very well indeed and I loved the *One Night in Bangkok*, which started the beginning of act two with excellent pace. Sarah ensured that the space was excellently used in the numbers, whether it was the entire company or just the principal dancers.

STAGE MANAGER (ALICIA WALKER)

The stage was very well managed by Alicia and her crew, with exceptionally prompt scene changes that maintained the pace perfectly. All of the stage properties appeared punctually and in the right place. Well done a disciplined and professionally run production.

LIGHTING (NAT KEILLER)

The only comment I can make is that some of the spot lighting reflected off the very shiny chess board and spilled onto the back drop, washing out some of the projected images. I can appreciate that this would not have been realised until the tech rehearsal so perhaps there was not any time to change the lighting plot. However, it did not affect my enjoyment nor did it disturb the overall effects of the scenes. The actors were clearly lit. The moods were superbly set by careful use of lights and the cues were expertly observed. Use of different colour washes aided the mood and helped emphasis

the different locations. The use of red, white and blue lighting in *One Night in Bangkok* was very well designed.

SOUND (DANIEL HERBERT)

The evening's production started with a poor balance of sound and I hardly heard Florence as she was drowned out by the band. However, this was quickly resolved, and equilibrium between band and singers was excellent for the majority of the show.

AUDIO VISUALS (CRAIG HOWARD)

The addition of the audio visuals, a combination of animation, video and pictures was extremely effective. Each scene was easily recognisable by a clear picture of the location. Some of the backdrop projections displayed moving pictures (Bangkok, for example), and some were animated (the falling chess pieces) but the most ingenious projection was that of an interior of a hotel room with actual video footage shown on the TV screen. Overall the effects were stunning, very clear and added perspective to the scenes.

SET (ALICIA WALKER & MARTYN PINNOCK)

The simple set of black flats acting as entrances and a large chequerboard (by Corporate Events) was enhanced by some excellent projected graphics on the back drop. The chequer board was very effective although because it had a gloss finish it meant every time the spotlights were used, the boxes were reflected onto the backdrop, sometimes washing out the projected image.

WARDROBE (JENNY HARRIS)

The Soviet party were dressed in identical black suits with red shirts or blouses whilst the Americans were in black suits and white shirts or blouses. Costume changes were made for the dancers (the black and white cheerleader outfits, complete with black and white pom-poms and the gorgeous oriental costumes when in Bangkok). The costume for the Arbiter was outstanding. The shoes, tight black trousers, black and white checked waistcoat, white jacket, hat and wig. All fitted perfectly.

PROPERTIES (MARGARET LYNCH & MARTYN PINNOCK)

Good use of properties – like the oversized chess pieces. I was a little confused about the period as some of the mobile phones seemed a little too modern for that period.

MAKEUP

All of the makeup was adequately applied by the cast.

FRONT OF HOUSE

My wife and I were made to feel very welcome at the beginning, in the interval as well as after the show. We would like to extend our sincere thanks to Pam and her husband, Derek and Rosemary and for all those who made the effort to chat to us afterwards.

PROGRAMME

The 36 page programme was crammed with some excellent and interesting articles. It had all of the prerequisites – a cast list, a song and scene listing, biographies for the principal performers. The strong use of colours throughout kept with the overall production concept (red, black and white).

I was a little apprehensive before watching this production, having seen it several times before, but I need not have worried as when it is performed with skilled musicians, a thoughtful director, choreographer and musical director and some excellent performers, then it was always going to be a thoroughly engaging and rewarding experience. The clever use of the projected images ensured that the production looked interesting and unique. I look forward to watching the society's next production in autumn.

A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to read 'Gordon Bird', with a stylized flourish at the end.

Gordon Bird
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