



Society : Slough Windsor and Maidenhead Theatre Company  
Production : **SISTER ACT**  
Date : Tuesday 21<sup>st</sup> October 2014  
Venue : Theatre Royal Windsor  
Report by : Gordon Bird, NODA Representative, Area 14

## Report

I was delighted to be invited to see the opening night of Sister Act, a musical by Alan Menken with lyrics by Glenn Slater and book by Cheri and Bill Steinkellner. The musical is based on the 1992 successful film that featured Whoopi Goldberg and was converted to a musical that opened on the West End in 2009.

The stage show has the same plot line, in that it follows night club singer Deloris Van Cartier who accidentally witnesses a murder by her gangster boyfriend and is taken into witness protection in a convent.

I have seen this show a couple of times now and enjoy it more and more each time I see it.

SWMTC's production was energetic, with some excellent principal performances and a very well rehearsed nun's chorus.

### **Mother Superior (DEBBIE CHRISTIE)**

Debbie gave a superb performance as the Mother Superior. The contrast to Deloris's character was exceptionally well defined. Her movement and mannerisms were first rate, depicting perfectly the reverence of her position. Debbie's singing was also of a very high standard, especially notable in *Here Within These Walls*.

### **Deloris Van Cartier (SHARON SEPALA)**

What an amazing part to play and what a superb performance by Sharon. From the opening moments, she commanded the stage with her personality and presence. She oozed class in each scene. It is very difficult to adopt a role that is so synonymous to a specific actress, in this case, to Whoopi Goldberg. However, Sharon portrayed this character her way and introduced her own personality to the role. Her singing was of very high standard indeed. One very small point, when using a stage mic as a prop (at the beginning of the show), you need to make sure the mic follows the mouth, rather than moving your head and keeping the mic stationary. However, this is a very small point in what was an outstanding performance!

### **Michelle (AMANDA THORNTON)**

### **Tina (SIOBHAN WHITE)**

The backing singers to Deloris have a very small part to play at the beginning of the show. They both adopted individual characters and developed the humour well (for example in the line "shot a smurf"). It is probably a personal preference but I do hate actors speaking directly out front unless it is part of the plot or style of show (i.e. panto). I noticed a couple of times that Amanda spoke directly out front when it would seem more natural to speak directly to those on stage. The singing and dancing for this pair was of a very high calibre.

**Curtis (STEVE MAPPLEY)**

Steve gave a believable performance as the gangster Curtis – and certainly looked the part in his red suit! His line delivery was spot on, with intonation delivered just right. I thoroughly enjoyed the song *When I Find My Baby*, which he confidently sang with a wonderful menacing edge.

**TJ (BEN MILES)**

**Joey (DAMIAN SOLLESSE)**

**Pablo (DAVID HOUSTON)**

All three gave superb supporting performances as Curtis's gangster colleagues. They each had a very distinctive character that gave them more depth than the stereotypical gangsters. The song, *Lady in The Long Black Dress* was superbly performed – both vocally and movement.

**Ernie (JAMES PLUCK)**

A brief but well defined character by James as Ernie, the taxi driver.

**Lt Eddie Souther (ROBERT POWELL)**

I have seen this part played several times and Robert played it slightly differently which worked very well indeed. The rather nervous, almost nerdy characteristics were there, but they were not over played which, to my mind, works better as it makes the final scene more believable. Robert played Deloris's eventual romantic partner, "sweaty" Eddie with sincerity. I thoroughly enjoyed his performance of *I Could Be That Guy* which perfectly set his character. A wonderful performance.

**Monsignor O'Hara (DAREN BRANDON)**

A lovely presented character by Daren. There were some nice touches, particularly in act two when O'Hara starts to get on the band wagon of the choir's success. The *Sunday Morning Fever*, with the nuns, was excellently performed.

**Sister Mary Patrick (LAUREN HUGHES)**

**Sister Mary Robert (STEPHANIE FOSTER)**

**Sister Mary Lazarus (SARAH SEABROOK)**

**Sister Mary Martin-of-Tours (JEAN JOHNSON)**

**Sister Mary Teresa (PAMELA PRIOR)**

My goodness – how well each of these performed! Each character was excellently defined. I did feel that STEPHANIE was slightly too quiet to begin with, but that is understandable because her character was timid and shy (which was excellently portrayed). And what an excellent performance in your song *The Life I Never Led*. Your facial expressions in the bar scene were also very well performed. The contrast to the characters was evident from the first scene and maintained throughout. I did feel that LAUREN could have played the vivacious Mary Patrick a little bigger in character, but I am sure that would have happened more during the run of the show. SARAH's interpretation of Mary Lazarus was perfectly executed. All of these sisters brought a good understanding of their characters to their performances.

**ENSEMBLE**

I was very impressed with the energy, sound and movement of the entire ensemble. This was once again another outstanding chorus performance as everyone looked very well rehearsed. Entrances and exits on the whole were well executed although I did notice a late entrance by one nun who snuck into one of the chorus numbers. I also notice the same nun had a rather modern looking watch being

worn under her habit. My view it is better to miss the number and ensure that you are ready for the performance rather than rushing on. However, this is a very small point, and I am sure that hardly anyone else noticed, and it did not devalue the outstanding performance by an excellent ensemble.

**Director (SIMON WOODRIDGE)**

The overall pace was keenly observed with the cast meticulously executing all the entrances and exits. The show was perfectly cast, with some outstanding individual performances but also some excellent chorus moments. On the whole, the accents were very well maintained; volume audible although Pablo's dialogue was perhaps delivered a little too quickly and with a strong latin America accent, it was very difficult to hear him (whether he spoke Spanish or English). All of the characters were very well developed, the nuns particularly having clearly defined characters. The biggest issue was the scene changes, hampered I feel by the lib that meant too many changes of location. I could see that in the second act the changes were swifter and I am sure as the week wore on, the set changes would have improved. Overall, this was a very well rehearsed, very funny and very well directed show, one that you should be proud of.

**Music Director (NEIL MATTHEWS)**

The singing in this show was delightful. The nuns songs especially were wonderfully performed with good strong harmonies. All the principals looked and sounded comfortable and produced a lovely sound. I felt the 8 piece orchestra complimented the singers very well indeed.

**Choreography (GEMMA HOUGH)**

The movement for the nuns was simple but, oh so effective! When one considers that there were nuns on stage from 17 to over 70, and all were expected to perform the same energetic moves, then this was very well rehearsed and presented. Given the tempo of the songs, the moves had to be quick and boy didn't they move! Well done Gemma on presenting not only a very interesting and enjoyable show for the audience, but one that I am sure the cast enjoyed too!

**Stage Manager (ALICIA WALKER)**

My goodness you had a busy show! It seemed every scene required a new set! I appreciate that when you hire a set in you do not know what you are going to get until the technical rehearsal which means there is a lot of time spent trying to get the set to work for you. You certainly had a well disciplined team around you as I could see that everyone had a clear task (to turn the toberone, strike an item, set an item, bring down the black drop etc) but even with a large crew the sheer number of tasks meant you were facing an uphill task to prepare for the next scene. I appreciate that I witnessed the opening night and know that these changes would have got quicker with more practise.

**Properties (MARGARET LYNCH & MARTYN PINNOCK)**

All the properties looked appropriate to the period and to the show. The stage props all looked relevant without any un-necessary items. I wondered if the bar could have been bigger, offering more of a range of drinks perhaps?

**Sound (DAN HERBERT)**

Overall the sound was very good, with a pleasant balance between the live orchestra and the singers on stage. I did feel the guitar overpowered the singers in the early numbers but this was soon rectified and was not aware there being any further issues.

### **Lighting (NAT KEILLER)**

The lighting plot was very well presented by Nat and the follow spot (JOE CALLERAN) was well executed. There was one late execution of a lighting cue and it was a shame that the actors decided to commence their scene in darkness rather than wait for the lights to appear. I am sure that this was a first night glitch and considering all the other cues were on time, then the rest of the run would have been issue free.

### **Wardrobe (JENNY HARRIS)**

Congratulations to Jenny for finding so many habits for her nuns! Also, my compliments for the tabards that were used when the nuns were performing as this additional looked perfectly in place. I did notice that a couple of nuns were without their tabards (not sure if this was due the lack of tabards or lack of time to put them on or a deliberate decision). There was also one nun who wore a very modern watch which was a shame. I only noticed because she came on late and of course all the dance moves required a lot of arms being raised. The "Sweaty Eddie" suits was an excellent idea and very well presented (as could not see the other costumes underneath).

### **Set**

The set looked superb, the candles at the back of the stage in the crypt looked suitably appropriate. The stained glass windows and details of the stone work were superb – really giving the feel of a church. The toblerones (down stage right and left) offered a quick way of moving from scene to scene and added interest. The street drop gave some interest to a couple of the cross over scenes – but wondered if this was really necessary. There were issues with sight lines, as I could see through the gap between the proscenium arch and the toblerones – meaning I could see the cast in the wings and the lighted candles of the church scene before they were turned. The candles could have been covered (or the nearest one to stage turned off?) and dressing the wings with blacks could have covered the gap. Overall, the church effect was magnificent and certainly added to several spectacular scenes.

### **Programme**

I do feel it is a shame that the NODA representative has to purchase a programme to be able to find out who is performing and establish the credits for the production. Most societies in the area to provide their reps a complimentary programme to assist them and perhaps this could be something that SWMTC can think about in future. The programme itself was of an exceptionally high standard and perhaps just a little over priced but contained a whole variety of interesting articles, superbly written by Mark Fisher © John Good. The photographs and art work are all of a very high quality and is probably the best programme I have seen by this society.

### **Front of House**

Thank you to Simon, Gemma and Johnny for taking the time and effort on what was obviously a very hectic evening to find a few minutes to speak to me.

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Overall this was an exceptionally enjoyable production which was slightly marred by a few slow scene changes but, thankfully, did not distract from an outstanding opening night performance by the cast.

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

**Gordon Bird**  
***NODA representative***  
***London Region, District 14***