

The Grayshott Stagers - There's No Business Like Show Business:

Review November 2021.

Stepping into Grayshott Village Hall on Friday evening to attend the opening night of The Grayshott Stagers latest production the warm welcoming atmosphere quickly dispelled memories of the mean-spirited weather outside and by the time of leaving the anticipated delights and joys of a rattling good evening's stage entertainment had been met in full.

The idea for this particular production, *There's No Business Like Show Business*, was put into place prior to the challenges and frustrations of Covid-19 and it served perfectly, not only as a way of celebrating the Stagers' 70th anniversary since its inception, but also to celebrate the coming together again of like-minded people who enjoy theatre after such a protracted absence.

The Stagers society was formed in 1951 by a group of local amateur drama enthusiasts; one of those being Barry Penny who was a member of the cast of their first play production, *John Marlow's Profession*. It is fitting tribute that Barry's son, Stephen, remains an active driving force within the Society and managed the lighting for this celebration performance.

The Stagers is a village society, but it has always demonstrated big city aspirations. In 1954 the Society expanded its repertoire into staging musicals eschewing the temptation to stage the 'safe' G&S operettas. Before the end of the 1970s the Society had successfully performed classics such as *Me and My Girl*, *Carousel* and *Half A Sixpence*, all still popular today. The Stagers have been at the vanguard of innovation and consistently punched above their weight. Never shying away from staging mildly contentious productions, such as *Best Little Whorehouse in Texas* and *La Cage aux Folles*, the Society has developed and maintained an envious reputation as being avant-garde.

Appropriately, the opening number from *Annie Get Your Gun*, *There's No Business Like Show Business* was performed with such gusto that the capacity audience were given due warning of the treats to follow.

The production included many favourite songs and dances from the rich list of shows staged during the Society's lifetime and this served to illustrate completely the versatility of the society. The variety of numbers chosen provided a perfect balance in styles and moods to keep the audience fully entranced. The credit for this must be given fully to show director Mary Coyte who maximised those skills endowed by her long

experience in amateur theatre, including 50 years with the Stagers! Her vision, enthusiasm and energy were exhibited by the cast in all facets of the performances.

The musical cast exuded confidence and enjoyment resulting in fine individual performances and rousing ensemble numbers. The cast was excellently accompanied by a three piece band, directed by Lizzie Hales, and such excellence met with warm applause as the audience showed their appreciation. Rarely does the musical director step out from the pit to perform, but on this occasion the audience were treated as Lizzie took to the stage to provide a very sassy rendition of *All That Jazz* from *Chicago*.

Throughout its 70 years of providing entertainment and enjoyment to thousands the backbone of its success has been built on its ability to stage quality drama over a wide range of genres in its plays. This aspect of the Society's activities was admirably demonstrated in this production. Act 1 of the show ended appropriately with a drama medley made up of short extracts from 18 plays with 10 actors in multi-roles portraying 55 characters as a seamless one-act play. Entitled *Murder, Matrimony, Matriarchs*, director Heather Legat achieved the impossible task of condensing 70 years' worth of plays by producing a cohesive and very entertaining melange of snippets. Her superb direction enabled the plethora of murder mysteries, domestic comedies and matriarchal plots to flow off the stage to the delight of the audience.

The drama side of the Stagers' repertoire continued to open Act 2 with the séance scene from Noel Coward's iconic play *Blythe Spirit* performed by the Stagers 40 years ago! Ellis Nicholls' direction ably supported the players and credit must be given to Sara Wilson-Soppitt for her portrayal of the iconic Madam Arcati.

Thereafter the momentum of the show was maintained and the infectious enjoyment of the stage company was transmitted to the appreciative audience in equal measure. This was a company show based on well directed teamwork and the continuity and pace were well maintained by Richard Weller as master of ceremonies whose wit and repartee added to the enjoyment. It fully achieved its aim to celebrate the Society's 70 years of giving theatrical pleasure and long may it continue. From one in the audience; "Thank you Stagers for a thoroughly enjoyable evening of entertainment and; who could forget Laura Musco singing as Mrs O from *Acorn Antiques!*?"

AJDB.