

**Molesey Musical Theatre - Henry, A Tudor Musical
Cecil Hepworth Playhouse - 15th June 2018**

MMT has braved new ground with this new musical, a revised performance of a show only once previously performed. Written in 2005 by Tess Townsend, Tony Carson and Alan Townsend, it told the tale of King Henry VIII and his reign, including his six wives, together with other important characters of that time.

An extremely effective stage set on two levels, courtesy of Mike Read, Andy Bloomfield and the cast caught the eye immediately. The use of space was well thought out, giving a palatial feel to the action.

We met the teenage Henry, well played by young Dylan Foley (who also played the Page) at Henry's marriage to his first wife Catherine of Aragon. Young Catherine was skilfully played by Darcey Conway, who also played Princess Elizabeth with distinct presence. Darcey, though only ten, has already appeared professionally in the West End. Elise Stannard also caught the eye as Princess Mary and Handmaid Winnie. Elise, only thirteen, shows real poise and is a name to watch.

Frankie Oldham who played the important role of The Fool, Will Somers, narrated and engaged with the audience throughout and is a would be professional actor. His talent and ease on stage is quite obvious and he graced this interesting production. I predict a fine stage future for Frankie.

The story faithfully followed the life and six marriages of Henry VIII with the fate of his wives very much to the fore. His angst at his initial inability to father a son and male heir was well portrayed by David O'Roarty in the title role. Importantly, David radiated the personal presence that the real King Henry would have possessed. His was an imposing figure and well cast in the role, showing a pleasant singing voice.

Among the six wives, one truly stood out for the sheer quality of her acting, singing, ability to inhabit the role and make the audience laugh. Alison Wheeler as Anne of Cleves, the unattractive (so called) "Flanders Mare" lit up the stage and will remain my personal aiding memory of this production. This in no way demeans the other five wives, all of whom played their roles with truth and spirit. They were:-

Joan Cannell	<i>Catherine of Aragon.</i>
Claire Fraser	<i>Anne Boleyn</i>
Portia Borrett	<i>Jane Seymour</i>
Youny Moon	<i>Catherine Howard</i>
Gloria Smith	<i>Catherine Parr</i>

All five actors made their individual characters interesting and submitted to their various fates - all bar the surviving Catherine Parr. Gloria, who played her was also the show choreographer and did fine work with the chorus dance and movement scenes.

MMT had engaged the show's scriptwriter and lyricist to direct the company and I commend them for having the foresight and wisdom to engage Tess Townsend. Her vision for her own show was in sharp focus throughout. Her use of the important characters who carried the plot was excellent. Skilful change of mood, tension and character interplay made for a riveting evening where the attention never flagged. The intense period feel was to the fore.

The use of one basic set used for a number of different places worked very well. The important bed and throne, together with banners showing each wife, including length of tenure, throughout the theatre, really

gave a period feel to the piece. Much thought had clearly been given and this worked admirably. The Hampton Court Garden on lower level was well designed. All in all the stage set was impressive and well used. Use of lighting and follow spot by Steve Farr made a strong impression. Phoebe Coulton assisted the director and must also deserve praise.

Music and singing was very apt for the Tudor age and much credit to the MD, conductor and also keyboard player Elizabeth Cooper. John Mitchell on guitar was orchestral arranger since the "birth" of Henry and has made a huge contribution to the success of the piece. Nick Handel on drums / percussion and Paul Sadler on a second keyboard added their talents. Some cast members sang very well, one or two less so, but the music overall was exceptional.

Costumes were top class, bordering on professional quality. Joan Cannell and Rita Anderson on wardrobe did a marvellous job. The robes, Royal dresses and the Fool's costume were very special.

Make up, which I must assume also includes responsibility for hair and wigs, though they were not specifically credited, was also of good standard. Joan Cannell, Lu Mulligan and cast members were credited for make up.

I was impressed by the general clarity of diction and enunciation, which was of unusually high standard for an amateur company. Credit to Steve Lonsdale on sound who clearly knows his onions!

A well rehearsed ensemble played their full part in this production's obvious success; the female screams when the headsmen held up the head of Anne Boleyn being particularly effective. Five dedicated male actors Darryl Tullet, Andy Bloomfield, Iain Cannell, Mike Read and Brian Higgs played eleven major historical characters between them and all did well.

To conclude, I was much taken by this show and by the top quality performance attained by MMT and I fervently hope this almost new show, though written in 2005 in a "Guildford kitchen and small music studio" reaches a wider audience. The audience in which I sat was clearly impressed, as was I!

Jon Fox

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