

Region

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Society : Panda Players  
Production : The Drowsy Chaperone  
Date : 8 March 2019  
Venue : The Elgiva Theatre, Chesham  
Report by : Judith Watsham

[Show](#)Report

Thank you for inviting me to report on your latest production and also for the drink and warm welcome from Helen Turner.

This was just about the best show I have seen the Pandas perform for a long time and congratulations to everyone concerned. Although not a well-known musical I did see 'Drowsy' in the West End a few years ago and enjoyed it then too. Essentially this is a send up of all those prewar American shows from the likes of Cole Porter and Gershwin; it is important that the cast realise this and I think that you all did because your poses and movements were just exaggerated enough without overdoing it.

Your very experienced director, John Asher, along with choreographer, Dana Mistin, had obviously worked you all very hard and the result was a very well balanced evening of entertainment, aided greatly by Jeff Eales' very effective set with its different levels and extra-large floor which projected into the audience; this did result in the loss of the first five rows of seats of course so I do hope that this reduction in potential ticket revenue did not affect your overall sales too badly.

It was most unfortunate that you had trouble with your CCTV because I was aware that the screen which should have showed the cast the MD, Catherine Françoise, was blank for most of the show although it did come on for the very short second half. Whether she could see you or not I don't know but I suspect that this was the cause of what I can only term 'car crash' moments when the MD appeared to lose control of both the really excellent band of 'musos' back stage and the cast – although both groups rallied quickly and sang/played through these moments to come out triumphant at the other end which showed the high standards of ability by both groups. This must always be a potential danger when the MD is not directly within the eyeline of those on stage, but it usually works perfectly well; such a shame that on Friday night at least a technical hitch caused a problem, but I can only report on the show I saw, not on another night's performance.

Lighting, Steve Urry, was excellent and isolated the small apartment, DSR in front of the tabs, from the action taking place on the main stage in a very effective way.

Sound, Roger Knight, worked well and the transition between what was apparently playing on a record player and band/cast in full flow was well managed.

Props, Mark Stephenson and Janice Suter, were superb. I especially liked your peacock perched on the garden topiary; the album covers were excellent as was the whole of the small apartment set. The fact that the design of the latter enabled it to double as a piece of furniture in the apartment and the bar in Mrs. Tottendale's home worked well.

Make up/wigs were down to Sarah Walker and Alexandra Swann. Some wigs looked good, like Kitty's, others, like Mrs. Tottendale's, a bit synthetic but the make-up was excellent and in period. One

problem though – a tattoo. A real 'no-no' for many shows, including this one, and I am sure you realise that. Yes, I know it was only visible in one scene but if Wardrobe could not supply a dress which covered the shoulders then it should have been masked with make-up.

Costumes, Helen Turner and Frances Newman, were all excellent and in keeping with the characters concerned. A good use of colour too. However, I thought the inept pair of gangster/chefs had a very strong pantomime flavour, hung about with modern stainless-steel kitchen utensils as they were. They are a send up of the gangster duo in *Kiss Me Kate* to a certain extent which works in the setting of the show but perhaps just the odd wooden spoon would have been preferable?

Martiarts Design produced your colourful programme but do try and proof read it as I spotted at least one definite 'typo' plus the name of the SM – see the last page of my Show Report!

In the title role, Clare Hill acted and sang very well. The dramatic send up of a 'rousing song' *As We Stumble Along* was particularly masterly as you never overplayed it.

Anita Rollingson looked and sounded right as the scatty Mrs. Tottendale, perhaps you could have been a bit more 'off with the fairies' at times but you developed your character well with a good accent.

Underling, the Butler, played by Marc Howden-Smith, was excellent with a good dead pan face. Well-polished shoes too and a good singing voice.

Carl Giacone who played bridegroom Robert Martin was another one who looked and sounded just right, maintaining a good accent. You managed the tap dance well.

George, his best man, James Yank, also had to tap dance. Well done to both of you gentlemen on your lace up tap shoes, but they looked unpolished with your immaculate tails. If you didn't have patent tap shoes, fine, but perhaps a lot more polish would have helped to achieve a good gleam? I am told that clear applied over the black produces a good sheen.

Kitty was well played by Kerry Middleton – but Kerry do remember your tattoo especially when in anything like a period piece and make sure it is covered either by your costume or makeup. Your comedy timing is excellent, and your squeaky American accent was well maintained; however, watch your diction and projection when using this voice as some of the words got lost.

Paul Woodstock as the theatre mogul Feldzieg was believable at all times. You too had a well sustained accent.

Janet van de Graaf, Alana Asher, was really excellent. I see from the programme that you have had professional training as well as a lot of experience and it showed. Your poses and timing, especially in *Show Off* were all excellent and as for that one-handed cartwheel – I am lost in admiration.

Latin lover Aldolpho, James Moorcroft, sported the most unlikely hairstyle I have seen recently but I know that the bouffant black hair with a white streak is how it was played on the professional stage. You strutted your stuff and swirled your cloak in a would-be seductive manner very well and your number, *Aldolpho* was very well performed.

Trix the Aviatrix was very well sung and acted by Amber Dye. You only had two short appearances as this character, and I noticed that you also supported the rest of the action very well as a member of the ensemble.

I have already mentioned the panto-like characterisations created by Jo Kontos and Trish Lewis as the gangster/chefs. Your facial expressions, under the painted on facial hair, were very funny indeed and you were both always immersed in your roles, even when the focus of the audience's attention was not on you.

The Ensemble all sang and moved well as well as executing the set changes in a very efficient way – no doubt well drilled by SM, credited in the programme as David J Marin but I think this should read Martin shouldn't it? *Toledo Surprise* was one of the most effective numbers in the show and your frequent freezes whenever the focus shifted to the apartment and The Man in Chair lifted the needle from the record were excellent and well maintained by you all.

However, the star of the show was the Man in Chair. This character has to hold the whole show together, often using nothing more than facial expressions and spot on timing; Tim Redman gave us all an object lesson in just how to achieve this without upstaging at any time. An incredible amount of dialogue was delivered in a very well maintained, and totally believable, accent and manner and your body language throughout told us so much about this man's personality and his life. An excellent well sustained accent Tim; you were always reacting to the story on stage and you never let your stage persona slip for an instant while watching the action with such unfeigned delight. Your expression of rapture when the cast of this, your favourite musical, dragged you out of your little comfort zone in the apartment and pulled you on stage for the finale was an absolute joy.

Although the book directs the Main in Chair to announce the Intermission, I am aware that the show does not usually have an Interval. I think you could have got away without one as it is a comparatively short show. However, I also realise that you have to set the 'wrong' show for a short period and many of the cast have to change into Oriental style costumes so perhaps it was necessary?

I really enjoyed all your performances – very well done to you every single Panda!

Judith Watsham  
Regional Rep NODA London 11 and 11A