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Society : Panda Players  
Production : Closer Than Ever  
Date : 15 July 2016  
Venue : The Little Theatre by the Park, Chesham  
Report by : Judith Watsham

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Show Report

Thank you for your warm welcome Trisha and David and for the refreshments.

This is not an easy show to report on – a six hander featuring talented singers with songs loosely strung together on the theme of love. Originally an off-Broadway show I see that it has had several revivals in the US but only a couple of professional outings in the UK. Your harmonies were very good, although there were some strange harmonic effects at times which must have been difficult to sing and proved a challenge for such a small cast.

Staging was superb, David Martin's clean and simple set showed that the stage in this small venue could be made to appear much larger than I have ever seen it before. This was at the expense of sacrificing the miniscule wings in favour of two doors at the back which proved perfectly adequate for the cast's entrances and exits. I did however feel that putting your Director and MD, Drew Cowburn, on stage along with Graeme Hollingdale on bass did not work very well: a) because Drew's keyboard dominated the whole of stage left and b) because the music was too loud at times drowning the singers when they were at the back of the set behind the musicians. A slight re-think of the audience seating and the blocks which formed the apron stage could have resulted in space on the hall floor for the two musicians perhaps?

Wardrobe by the Company was effective; usually black with the odd costume change or colourful addition – it all worked and enabled each change of character to be well expressed. However, detail is important. Consider shoes please. Dave Evans' rather scruffy footwear did not match his very smart wedding suit and pink tie in *Another Wedding Song*; conversely Jim Moorcroft's shiny footwear did not match either his worn fitness gear or his companions' suitably scruffy trainers. I also noticed Jim's large watch which caught the lights sometimes – the rest of you did not wear watches for this reason I suspect.

Lighting, designed by Christian Ashby, operated by Hannah Luggar was good. No credit was given in the programme for sound but perhaps the keyboard could have been muted a bit?

Martiarts' simple programme design worked well and gave us all the information we needed, including a nice mention of NODA. Always a very good idea to give a prominent mention to your next show of course and I am looking forward to *The Witches of Eastwick* next March.

Many of the songs told a story which was very well acted and all your accents were consistently maintained. Everyone was word and, almost always, note perfect. Diction was very good. It is invidious to single anyone out but there were a few numbers which, in my opinion, were particularly excellent.

In Act I the most notable numbers were:

Frans van den Berg and Karen Hockey who gave us an excellent *You Want to be my Friend*, particularly well-acted here by Karen. Karen also showed her considerable acting talents in her solo, *Life Story*; Katy Devine's solo *The Bear, The Tiger, The Hamster and The Mole* was also very well acted and sung; the eternal triangle, with a twist, *She Loves Me Not*, was sensitively performed by Dave, Katy and Jim and *Miss Byrd* showed Amber Dye's considerable comedic acting and singing talents to the full. Dave's *What Am I Doin'* and Jim's *I'll Get Up Tomorrow Morning* – the sentiments expressed in this one obviously rang many bells with the audience – were another two numbers which were both excellently sung and acted.

In Act II there were three really outstanding numbers:

*Three Friends*, Katy, Amber and Karen; *There*, Amber and Frans, and finally *Father of Fathers*, Dave, Frans and Jim. This last one was, for me, the best in the show both in terms of the song itself but mostly of the performance.

A very challenging piece, well directed and performed. Congratulations.

Judith Watsham  
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