



ROSE BOWL ADJUDICATION

NAME OF COMPANY: **TAOS MUSICAL THEATRE AND
TROWBRIDGE YOUTH THEATRE**

NAME OF PRODUCTION: **'ANNIE'**

VENUE: The Arc Theatre, Trowbridge

DATE: Thursday 19 May 2016

ADJUDICATOR: Gerry Parker

Those who dismiss this show as being pure 'schmaltz' should read the notes in the programme on the history of the comic strip 'Little Orphan Annie'. There is more than just a hint there that Harald Gray who originated the 'strip' in 1924 was interested more than a little in politics. If you think how close to the end of 'The Great War' the first cartoon appeared the name of one of the characters, *Daddy Warbucks*, takes on a whole new meaning. He may turn into putty in the hands of *Little Orphan Annie* but the hard steel like resolve that made him a billionaire, and retained his fortune at a time when most of the country were going broke can clearly be seen as a very significant part of his character. Reading those notes, I drew the impression that the Director of this production was well aware of these facts and indeed did not in the main, let the story telling and relationships between characters, sink into over sentimentality. When the 'ship' did sail too near to those 'schmaltzy' shores it was invariably the fault of the authors of the original stage script rather than the Director, or Harald Gray.

Having decided on the style of storytelling, the production team were then faced with how to visually tell the tale in the theatrical space allocated to them. A nice classic *Annie* image greeted us on the backcloth when we first entered the auditorium putting us in the right frame of mind before 'curtain up'. This theme was continued to good affect during the well-played Overture with what appeared to be some original images from newspapers appearing. As with all open stages, this one posed problems for your stage designer and stage crews and the permanent rostra stage right, firstly housing Miss Hanniigan's office, provided many useful options.

When the scene changed to the street from the orphanage, the Orchestra did an excellent job of covering the move, a task they were to undertake with equal success many times throughout the evening. There was of course no scene change in the classic sense of the word, no room in this cramped environment for even your trusted stage crew to bring on 'flats,' 'trucks' or fly in scenery. An intelligent use of images projected on to the backcloth had to suffice instead. Although these are never quite as satisfying to look at, or I suspect for the stage teams to work with, if well-chosen and skilfully presented, they can, as these did, serve their purpose very well.

In these circumstances the Lighting Team are faced with a different challenge to the one regularly thrown up by a full traditional setting. There was extensive use of pools of

light and spots isolating characters, jobs made even more difficult by the presence of the Orchestra in what would normally be the down stage left area. Faced with these challenges, the lighting team came up with a lighting plot which, whilst it did not present any great dramatic effects was very acceptable, enhancing individuals and scenes continually throughout the production. Cueing of lighting changes, immensely important in such circumstances, was invariable spot on, no pun intended.

It is not uncommon nowadays to find the Orchestra removed from sight, confined to a room somewhere else in the building where their input like that of all the principal singers is individually mic'ed, and mixed by the sound team. There may of course be no suitable room in this building to encase the Orchestra for such a scenario to take place, or the MD, with perfect justification may be happier to be in closer fuller control of his musicians' output compared to the vocalists. There are arguments in favour of both arrangements and sitting as I was, all but in the MD's lap, I have to say that with the principals equipped with individuals' mic's the balance was rarely overwhelmingly in favour of the well-controlled musicians playing immediately before my right ear. As attentive to the vocalists as he was to the musicians, the MD was from his close proximity to the action able to ensure that soloists and chorus received full support throughout proceedings.

With the audience sitting so close to the action costumes come under more intense scrutiny than is usual. The overall effect created by the Wardrobe Team was good. It would probably be better to look in more detail at costumes as we discuss individual performances.

As expected in a show that had only stage dressing and, of course, visually imposed images on the back cloth, to change from one scene to another the action moved at a merry pace. The actors, no doubt encouraged by the Director, kept the same rapid pace befitting this bouncy show. There is plenty of movement in this show, ranging from the Orphans, via the inheritance of 'Hooverville' to Daddy Warbucks' servants, but no big ensemble or solo dance numbers. Making intelligent use of the space available and keeping in mind that often those involved in the movement had to sing lustily at the same time, the Choreographer devised movement that enhanced the pictures being drawn without ever fussing those taking part in the number. Making use of every possible means of exit and entrance this open stage area offers, the Director and Choreographer made sure that the visual pictures flowed freely and that terrible sight of a full chorus trying to evacuate the stage and ending up in a queue to disappear into the wings did not occur.

Quite a few professional shows advertise themselves as having 'the feel good factor', often they do not live up to that billing, this one - apart from a few moments when it took itself too seriously and temporarily lost its oomph - did.

INDIVIDUAL PERFORMANCES

Annie: Quite a few actresses have kick-started their careers with this role, including Sex and the City's Carrie Bradshaw, Sarah Jessica Parker, who was one of several young ladies to follow Andrea McArdle into the role of Annie on Broadway. Like all outstanding roles this one carries with it tremendous responsibilities, if you fail to provide a strong focal point to the story the whole production will falter. That is not the sort of speech to deliver to you just prior to you going on stage, but now some time after you have shown your ability to carry those responsibilities, it is only fair I think to underline what an enormous task you took on.

You quickly established yourself as the leader of the Orphans, a task made a little more difficult to do physically than is often the case with one or two of the opposition being taller and more substantially built than yourself. Musically, via the plaintive, 'Maybe' you laid down a marker about the standard of vocal presentation we could expect. This did

not diminish in any way as the show progressed, despite the best efforts of 'Sandy' to up-stage you in, 'Tomorrow'. Some nicely timed pieces of mime and interjections marked your work in the scene where Grace came looking for an Orphan to take back to Warbucks' house for Christmas. When you arrived there, the strong defence of your new coat and defiantly sung, 'I Think I'm Gonna Like It Here' kept the fiercely independent character firmly in place.

When 'Daddy' Warbucks arrived he proved to be rather too easy a 'push over' for you to twist him around your finger and have him join you and Grace at the Movies. The reasons for this are to be found more in his interpretation of the role at this time than your deliberately broad, if anything not broad enough, pleas for attention. The fact that you and Warbucks had such a close relationship stood you in good stead for the emotional scene leading up to his attempt to replace your broken locket, and the, 'You Won't Be an Orphan for Long' number. Skilfully lit in a manner that emphasised the poignant atmosphere of the scene, you produced a character which fitted this moment extremely well.

The opening scene of Act 2, which was set up, and lit, swiftly and soundly by the stage teams did not 'gel' as well as the finale of Act 1. Incorporating Miss Hannagan's office into the Radio Station was a reasonable idea, but the atmosphere of a studio with us, the show patrons as an audience to the Radio Show, was not created. There was one point where you could have helped to tie us into the scene tighter that was missed. When you were singing your opening solo at times you glanced sideways, twisting your body as if seeking support. This action had the effect of disengaging you from the audience at a time when all your attention should have been on keeping a close relationship with them. It was an action you were to repeat very surprisingly during the final encore number. In the main of course we do not want you to spend too much time looking straight out front and indeed, quite rightly, you did make and retain good eye contact with the others actors you were involved with. When however, the moment comes to accept the audience as another actor, the same rules apply.

A nice rendition of, 'Tomorrow' gave the 'White House' scene, which was through no fault of yours, rather underpowered, a much needed lift. An excellent example of your ability to interact with other characters came in the scene with *Daddy Warbucks* when he sings 'Something Was Missing' your reactions to his emotional outburst were lovely to watch. The scene where you were claimed by *Shirley and Ralph Mudge* was equally well played, as was the feistily delivered "Who the heck are Shirley and Ralph Mudge" line. From here on through to the final curtain the determined little red haired battler you had so skilfully crafted stayed firmly in control of the situation.

Daddy Warbucks: My only real criticisms of this otherwise splendidly presented characterisation was that there was not enough ruthlessness on view. As he tells Annie, he grew up virtually an orphan in *Hell's Kitchen*, clawed his way to the top and was not particularly concerned about how he treated people on his way up because he had no intention of ever coming down the financial ladder. He talks to top politicians and Captains of Industry as if they were office boys demanding rather than requesting assistance, but never asking for help from anyone. For all of that he is obviously a fair man and good employer as the eager anticipation and loyalty shown by his staff awaiting his return home shows.

We need to see this ruthlessness, perhaps even harshness, in those opening moments of your return home if the transformation caused by a little orphaned waif is to be fully appreciated. One of the places this can be shown is in the early telephone conversations reporting the gloomy state of affairs you had found on your travels, but I never felt that those at the other end of the telephone were all but standing to attention when you called them. Once Annie had appeared on the scene wrapping you around her little fingers as only a lovable child could, your portrayal slipped beautifully into focus. There were a couple of places - in the scene when you take Annie to meet President Roosevelt, a Democrat politician as opposed to the Republican party you supported, during the

initial surge to find Annie's parents, and then discredit the Mudgetts - when a slightly sharper edge would not have gone amiss, but even here the more amiable, loving man you had so expertly created did not look out of place.

The change of tack, growing more and more uncomfortable as you succumbed to Annie's far from subtle suggestions that you accompany her and Grace to the Roxy was neatly conveyed. Your first foray into the musical side of the show in NYC left us in no doubt that you would have no difficulty in handling the vocal side of the role. A little dig here at the Wardrobe Team for not finding you a richer looking coat, one perhaps with a fur, popular at the time, or velvet collar. (This is where you tell me the coat was made by Hugo Boss or Gucci!) The tricky sequence leading up to the finale of Act 1 where vocal, dramatic and comedic skill have to be blended carefully together was handled with finely balanced care and attention. Another nicely judged moment came in the Radio Studio where your deliberate bad presentation of the written script was first class. Your anger at having delivered a commercial was a little too underplayed to be fully effective, Mr Warbucks is not a man to accept that he has been tricked with any good grace whatsoever. I cannot say that you completely convinced me that you had been up all night sorting out the rights and wrongs of Mr and Mrs Mudgett's claim to be Annie's parents, more signs of dishevelment were required.

The sincerity which had always been at the forefront of this portrayal helped to create an ideal mood for '*Something Was Missing*' and '*I Don't Need Anything but You*' to be delivered, and the run through to the 'Happy ever after' finale more acceptable than one filled with unreal, syrupy sentiment.

Miss Hannigan: I have seen Miss Hannigan played at the far ends of the spectrum, a silly drunken caricature, and an evil, money grabbing, sexually frustrated, lonely and disappointed woman. There are elements of both of these interpretations in the character, and the difficult task facing the player given this role is to mix the cocktail so that we get a taste of them all without one or the other overpowering the other flavours within the drink. There are plenty of opportunities to generate laughter, many of which have for the good of the production to be taken. If however that is your only ambition, then the character becomes very one-dimensional. Fortunately, we had an actress on hand who, whilst being no mean hand at delivering a comic line, had more ambition as far as creating a character was concerned.

In your dowdy, unattractive dress and hint of a hangover, you correctly did not make a pleasing picture when you first arrived on stage. Your aggressive attitude towards the orphans, underlined by a passionate delivery of '*Little Girls*' fitted this physical portrait admirably. I think you could have shown your predatory feelings towards the male sex rather more in that early exchange with Bundles, and in your attitude towards the 'Cop' who brought the runaway Annie back to the orphanage. In both cases it would take 'two to tango' and so they, and perhaps the Director, have to take some of the blame for your intentions not being clear to the audience.

The daily 'Soap Opera' to which you were addicted, was well-produced by the Sound Team and the addiction to such a programme helped to underline the frustration you were drawing in the character. That nasty print dress, the opposite to Grace's neat appearance, made the gap between the two women even wider than it had first appeared. There was just a hint of the darker side of your nature as you tried to rob Annie of the chance of spending Christmas at the Warbucks' mansion, and this emerged even stronger when Lily and Rooster appeared. When these two reappeared and the plot to gain access to Warbucks \$50,000 developed, we saw right into your 'black' heart. There was also a nice, subtle change in the presentation of '*Easy Street*' between the lighter touch shown in the first offering and the black thoughts behind the plot hatching immediately after number two rendition.

Throughout, however, you never took Miss Hannigan too far down the serious dramatic route leaving behind chances to create humour. In your frustration on hearing that Annie was about to be adopted by Warbucks, futile attempts to control the orphans and, at the end, attempts to wheedle yourself out of trouble with the authorities, there was always a touch of humour on hand in this well balanced portrayal.

Grace Farrell: One of life's naturally elegant people, Grace in her capacity of the right hand of a 'billionaire' business man at a time when there were few millionaires in the USA always added that extra touch of class to this self-made man. Not that Warbucks was crude or coarse in any way. Unlike a cynic as described in Oscar Wilde's 'Lady Windermere's Fan' by Lord Darlington as someone "Who know the price of everything, and the value of nothing," Daddy Warbucks has educated himself as he has been acquiring his billions and knows the value as well as the price of the quality items in this world. He surrounds himself with top quality goods, and people who are not only good at their job, but also look the part, one of these being his most efficient and elegant secretary Grace.

Your appearance and demeanour therefore is of the utmost importance. Dressed smartly, but not flashily, an ideal contrast to the dishevelled Miss Hannigan, and 'tarty' Lily St Regis, you looked like a lady of quality with brains to match the physical image. The addition of a hat and gloves, befitting for this period helped no end to mark Grace's place in the local society hierarchy. The scene in which you told Miss Hannigan about Mr Warbucks' requirements regarding the choice of an orphan to stay at his house for the Christmas period developed well your attitude, alienating Miss Hannigan as a bond with Annie grew with each mimed exchange.

Although you were not given a big solo number to show off your vocal powers there were enough opportunities, all nicely taken, in '*I Think I'm Gonna Like It Here*' and '*N.Y.C.*' for us to appreciate the quality of your singing. The character you had established fitted neatly into its place between your employer and the Butler Drake and the servants, respected by both. The relationship with Annie is tricky to judge. You have initially to show sympathy when she offers to clean the floors and windows, but never patronise her for a single moment. Gradually this sympathy grows into a genuine love for this feisty little battler, and when she all but breaks down at the thought that she really is an orphan your measured response compared to Mr Warbucks' panicky reaction offering her a brandy produced just the right calming influence on the scene.

Even trickier is the personal relationship with Warbucks. As an employer we know from the outset that you have immense respect for him, and we did not to quote an old saying 'need the brains of Lloyd George' to realise that your affection for him goes far beyond the workplace. Like most men, Warbucks is far slower on the romantic uptake than the ladies and so it is left to you rather than him to show us some markers leading to your true feelings towards him. It is a very difficult line to walk, particularly because even at the end of the show the personal relationship is still a shadowy affair. When I say that a few more warm looks, and/or almost involuntary shows of affection would not have gone amiss, it is hardly the harshest of criticisms, especially in view of the fact that if you were to err on one side or the other less was certainly better than more and much more in keeping with this admirably controlled polished portrayal.

Rooster Hannigan and Lily St Regis: For all the humour he generates and the flamboyance of his character, Rooster 'aint' a nice man. As Lily points out when the question of what to do with Annie after they have obtained the \$50,000 surfaces, "When Rooster wants someone to disappear, they disappear". He is a 'con man' living by his wits and quite ruthless in his pursuit of the good things of life, the sort of man who would rob an elderly lady of her life savings leaving her penniless, and not lose a moment's sleep about it. Your singing of '*Easy Street*', which you performed in fine style,

sums Rooster up extremely well, not only do you want that sort of life, but believe that it is no more than your due.

Without ever chasing after laughs, reducing Rooster to a mere comic figure, you nevertheless rarely missed an opportunity to garner a laugh that was there naturally for the taking. Like many an egotistical man, you use women to, as you see it, embellish your image and the 'dumb blonde' Lily fitted ideally into that category. Rooster would want a girlfriend whom he believed was of a lower intellect than himself, and your Lily, with just a hint that you were not quite as dumb as you made yourself out to be, looked and sounded ideal for the role. When it came to tackling the musical side of the character, you showed that both as a singers and dancers you had the talent to make the best of the numbers.

The way in which the sequences where Rooster and Lily become Ralph and Shirley Mudge leave you with no option other than to overplay the scenes, in a way that make the onlooker wondering how on earth anyone could fall for such a pair of phonies. In these circumstances, all you can do is to play the roles 'flat out' giving the impression that no matter how improbable the words and actions are, you believe in very word and action entirely. This is what you both did making the sequences perfectly acceptable.

There was a lovely drive to the expertly choreographed reprise of '*Easy Street*', with all three of you in top form. From there it was natural progression to the telling, smug expression on Rooster's face when he finally got his hands on the certified cheque, and the joy that rippled through the audience when you at last received your just desserts. That final declaration by Rooster that if he and Lily were going down then Aggie was going with them, added the perfect underlining to this finely drawn, feckless character.

Franklin D Roosevelt and Eleanor Roosevelt: The last and until the rules are changed the only U.S. President to win four presidential elections, he died in April 1945 whilst serving his fourth term in office. Not only was he a distinctive man because of his political record but also for overcoming the physical disability caused by polio which from 1921 confined him for much of his life to a wheelchair. It is ironic that the authors of this show's book make him such a friend of Daddy Warbucks because although his feelings towards Roosevelt mellowed later in life when FDR was first elected in 1933, the time that this show is set, Annie's creator Harald Gray was a strong opponent of Roosevelt and his 'New Deal'.

As result of his soon to become world famous 'Fireside chats' on radio, Roosevelt became very much a father figure to the great American public. As his cabinet colleges later vouched for he, with the backing of his strong willed wife Eleanor was no 'pussy cat' when it came to making political decisions. Both of these side to his character - the father figure and the strong political leader - were present in your interpretation of the role. It was appropriate that for the first time in his life Daddy Warbucks went to such a man and asked for help in finding Annie's parents and the real identity of Ralph and Shirley Mudge.

Eleanor was a lady with the reputation of being a very strong character, it has been said that had she rather than her husband attended the famous major powers' wartime conferences with Joseph Stalin and Winston Churchill, the Russian leader would not have been able to obtain as many concessions to the Soviet Union as he did. With that in mind it was a trifle incongruous to see her reduced in this instance to little more than a helper for the wheelchair bound president. Appropriately turned out, and always carrying yourself with dignity, you still managed to create a distinct figure.

The Cabinet / Cordell Hull / Frances Perkins / Harald Ickes /

Henry Morgenthau: If I have neglected to name the full Cabinet list of members please forgive me. When you consider that the four mentioned were politicians with a very high profile in the 1930s, Cordell Hull who held the high office of Secretary of State, Frances Perkins the first woman to hold a post in the U.S. Cabinet, Hard Ickes Secretary

for the Interior, who was with Frances Perkins the longest serving member of Roosevelt's administration, Harold Morgenthau Secretary of the Treasury, are all reduced in this story to being mere bit players it tells you that they cannot be played as insignificant supporting players. Nice to see those playing these roles were determined not to present them as cardboard cut outs. When the opportunities came - Frances Perkins suddenly coming to life with suggestions about how to lift the country out of the deep depression it was in, and Harold Ickes letting his hair down singing down on one knee a la Al Jolson - they were readily taken, helping to lift the scene in the Cabinet room onto a higher level.

Bert Healy / Radio Producer / Sound Effects / Jimmy Johnson /

Fred McCracken: The combined efforts of this quintet usually leave a deeper impression than they did on this occasion. In the main I think the blame for this must go onto the staging of the Radio Studio which did not create the right atmosphere. Admittedly the stage itself was not particularly conducive to the cause. In an attempt to 'jolly up' the sequence, several mimed pieces of business were introduced and although they were all played out with complete commitment by no means all of them were fully effective. They also had the effect of taking the focal point away on too many occasions from the hard working 'top banana' front man, Bert Healy. Bert is a man who is very much aware of his position as the leader of this Radio Show, and whilst the Masked Announcer and Radio Ventriloquist may both cast envious eyes on his position, there is no way that Bert is going to give them the slightest opportunity to upstage him.

No complaints that they were all played in the broadest manner, they are after all acting out made up characters which since the listener can only hear, have to be heavily underlined in order to make an impression. Taken individually the on-air trio all created nicely rounded characters who, apart from those moments when the cueing was not tight enough, made good use of the dialogue at their disposal.

The Producer and Sound man are faced with slightly different set of problems, and in their case more effort should have been made to draw our attention to them when they were called into action. As it was, too often their moment in the spot light had come and was gone before we in the audience realised they were in action.

The Boylan Sisters: The epitome of close harmony 'Sister Act' singers like the trio of 'Babies' in the comedy song 'Triplets' you do everything alike, you look alike, you talk alike, and there can also be a hint of the next line in the song 'and what is more we hate each other very much'. You fulfilled the first suggestion you looked alike, although there was room for some rather more flamboyant dresses, shoes, and accessories to have been on show. Vocally you were in excellent form but was it my imagination or were you given less to sing than is usual in this score? For whatever reason you appeared not to be as strongly featured during the time in which you occupied the crease. What you did present was always of high quality fitting ideally into your place in the production.

Drake / Mrs Pugh / Cecille / Mrs Geer / Annette / Sophie: Drake alone of this group of important supporting players has a real chance to make a telling contribution to proceedings, and these opportunities were not ignored. There was the right air of authority about Drake as he set about his duties as head of the Warbucks household, and deference without a hint of subservience towards Grace and Mr Warbucks. The little squeal of delight and hop of delight when you believe Annie is about to be adopted was a delight. Each of the ladies had looked beyond the few words in the script that were spoken about them, made fine use of the small amount of dialogue that came their way. As a result, it would be fair to say that all of them created characters that did not disappear within the crowds they often found themselves in, benefitting the scenes in which they were involved considerably.

Star to Be: One of the most aptly named characters in the whole show your opportunity is a very small one which requires more than a hint that given the chance here indeed was a player who will be playing a leading role in the very near future. You gave off enough personality and showed enough vocal ability to make those thoughts appear to be a realistic possibility.

Justice Brandels: One of those cameo roles that are so important within the story but for which the actor taking the role is given virtually no ammunition with which to create the man. He has to look and move like a person to whom authority is second nature. Dressed suitably in formal attire you looked and held yourself in a manner befitting your lofty position, and although often pushed towards the periphery of the action you did not allow this façade to drop out of place. The results was a character who always fulfilled his purpose in the storyline.

Bundles McClusky / Lt Ward: I place this pair together because both of you were slightly missed opportunities. Not I hasten to add by yourselves, but with Miss Hannigan who only half-heartedly tried to become amorous with you, demonstrating her pent-up sexual frustration in a humorous manner. What we saw in these relationships was good, but there was with just a little push much more fun hiding just behind the door. The two very different characters created, the happy-go-lucky Bundles and slightly self-important Lt were ideal targets for such an approach.

Apple Seller / Dog Catcher, Cop: Two more New York characters who help to build the mosaic that makes a good background for the story to develop. The Apple Lady who has once again failed in her quest to find customers for her apples delivered her lines with that sense of despair that comes from continually being frustrated in genuine efforts to make life a little better. In some ways the 'Cop' who has settled for a dead end job in which he has no interest is even more to be pitied than the Apple Seller. Two nicely drawn neat cameos.

The Orphans: When this group of natural scene stealers were in full flight even the most experienced of actors were invariably fighting a losing battle. When the likes of Molly, Duffy or Pepper had a telling line or action that thrust them to the forefront any adults present might as well have evacuated the stage. It is always a delight to watch such natural talent in action, provided that they are well disciplined and not simply showing off. No one could accuse this group of being that self-indulgent, or of trying to 'milk' the audience for even more sympathy, which had they achieved such a response would have turned charming scenes into syrupy over sentimentality.

I do not know how readily they responded to the Director, Choreographer, and M.D.'s instructions, only they can say whether they were a delight or a pain to work with. No matter what the answer to that last question is, the result was that individually and as a team they moved well and sang the numbers with great gusto, in doing so giving the audience much pleasure.

Hooverville Chorus and Servants: Apart from not being fully convinced by their physical appearance that all those in 'Hooverville' were on the bread line, and regretting that when the servants were instructed to 'spiff themselves up' most reappeared in their working clothes, these members of the cast were admirable in every respect. The 'Hooverville' number was sung with tremendous feeling, leaving any would be vacuum cleaner buyers in not doubt that they would purchase a Dyson cleaner rather than a Hoover.

The responses to Annie's changing fortunes were excellent, with some lovely individual responses shining out amongst the nice pictures which were constructed to frame these scenes. In both guises at 'Hooverville' and in the Warbucks mansion, the ensemble movement was crisp and the singing right in keeping with the spirit of the moment.

Sandy: After continually up-staged Annie as she attempted to maintain our full attention to her singing of, 'Tomorrow' this hound then behaved immaculately when asked to move from one side of the stage to the other. The actors were then allowed a long respite in order to tell their story and sing their songs before Sandy reappeared to receive due attention when taking centre stage for the final bows as the true 'star' of the show.

Thank you for the friendly reception and much needed refreshing cup of tea after a long trying journey. A repeat of the preshow reception and sustenance was much appreciated during the interval. With regards and best wishes for your future productions.

Gerry Parker