

“The Rise and Fall of Little Voice”
Rotherfield Players Friday 25th September 2015

Twenty years ago Glasgow’s favourite accolade was “Pure dead brilliant! “ which totally sums up this amazing production by the players. A simple story of a lonely vulnerable lass plagued by a crass, desperate mother- but who is then discovered to have an extraordinary vocal talent before being pushed too hard, crashes to earth but then rises like the phoenix.

We have never really liked productions in the round as one always misses a key verbal or acted message at some point, but the delightful inclusive intimacy of Becky Sym’s inspired direction made us all feel like regulars at a northern pub watching life’s dramas unfold around us on an epic Saturday night. The Spartan, almost absent, set somehow made the gamut of emotions Becky teased out of the actors all the more joyful, and in turn crashingly poignant, as events progressed. Author Jim Cartwright must put his script through a pressure cooker to get such a range of human emotion in one shortish play – the first reading must daunt any director. Another key element was the discipline displayed in maintaining such consistent northern accents.

The engine room, the old boiler, which drove the production on at real pace was Emma Harrison’s utter credibility as Mari the blowsy, rampantly desperate mother of Little Voice – fuelled with 98 octane cheap sherry she hurtles through her selfish life only too aware her Best Before Date is way behind her. Emma’s stunningly powerful performance is the essential fulcrum for LV’s springboard enabling her salmon leap into life.

As Little Voice, in the first Act the subtle delivery of Alice Burrell gives a beautifully sensitive portrayal of a damaged girl holding her loneliness as a cloak around herself, when in Act II she first rises to the surface of the pool of fear into the glamour of the spotlight its like the old Ready Brek advertisement - she seems to glow from within before releasing her golden voice like the sun coming from behind a cloud in early June. Alice has talent and can catch with real authenticity the essential elements of timbre from past voices as diverse as Edith Piaf to Judy Garland, Marilyn Monroe to Lulu and on to Shirley Bassey in quite an extraordinary way, whilst being an enchanting presence on the stage.

Welcome back Graham Scott – his tightly energetic vision of Ray Say’s version of selfish desperation exquisitely matched Mari’s own private hell and eventually nearly destroyed her – a very good actor who showed us how to go from comedy to grinding pathos in one smooth glide. Presented with the challenge of playing two characters in quick succession in a small cast with nowhere to hide, Brian Wright has elements of Ronnie Barker – a good actor who can hide behind his own face to be someone completely different within minutes whilst still holding centre stage, his strong performance as the bluffly bombastic Mr Boo was another key element in the play’s journey.

It was never entirely clear if LV was ever going to fully return Billy's adoration and Christian Jarvest must have cleverly unearthed one of those dreadful moments of teenage uncertainty of worth, and held onto it throughout his clever and sensitive delivery of Cartwright's angst ridden lines. Occupying her natural trajectory in the comedic orbit of the solar system surrounding the key mother/daughter relationship Lynn Lunn as Sadie interjected a leavening of light relief with her usual easy poise when asked to fund a chuckle or two from virtually no lines.

We are currently mindful that The Few could not have won the battle of Britain without the unnamed and unsung support of ground and technical crews, and although too many to mention Sue Exton's production crew behind this truly exhilarating performance deserve the same approbation.

Peter Thompson