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Society : Centre Stage
Production : Jekyll and Hyde
Date : 4 April June 2019
Venue : Bridewell Theatre
Report by : Carly Hilts and Simon Jones

Show Report

General

Thank you for inviting us to this fast-paced and impressively choreographed production – some of the ensemble numbers positively crackled with energy. Well-rounded performances made this a very enjoyable night – well done, all!

Players-Leading

Charlie Houseago (Jekyll/Hyde) – As soon as he spoke his first lines, Charlie’s resonant speaking voice promised good tenor singing to come, and we were not disappointed. He really made ‘This is the Moment’ his own, with confident delivery and some great high notes. We enjoyed his characterisation of the fatally ambitious Jekyll, and were impressed by the stamina of his vocal chords-shredding performance as Hyde, but while he distinguished the two characters’ voices very well we would have liked to have seen more contrast in their physicality (though we recognise from the Director’s notes that this was a deliberate decision). But this was an arresting and very interesting performance that Charlie committed to 100%, and he should be applauded for tackling the undeniably demanding dual role with energy and imagination.

Charlotte Donald (Lucy Harris) – a stand-out performance, Lucy is an amazing singer with a bluesy, soulful tone and a spectacular belt. She is also an impressively flexible dancer (her high kick while being held in the air, lying on her side, during ‘Bring on the Men’, was particularly impressive). But while her Lucy packed a brassy, gusty punch when the character was in ‘performance mode’, she could also be almost painfully vulnerable. This was particularly the case during ‘A New Life’, where Charlotte gave a strikingly intelligent performance – rather than merely singing the lyrics, you could see the ideas forming on her face before she expressed them. A well-rounded, moving, and versatile performance.

We’d also like to add a quick extra note for both Charlie and Charlotte – during a scene when Lucy and Hyde were both kneeling on the bed, it half-collapsed with a loud noise – but they didn’t miss a beat, didn’t laugh, didn’t visibly react – consummately professional, well done both!

Eva McNally (Emma Carew) – Eva has a lovely rich singing voice, with a solid belt and secure high notes. We enjoyed her sparky characterisation – she really nailed Emma’s independent spirit and her depth of feeling for Jekyll – but this was also an elegant performance with great depth of feeling and sensitive emotion.

Stuart James (Gabriel John Utterson) – a kindly presence, though sometimes a little impassive, he provided a voice of calm and reason that offered an effective foil to the more tempestuous Jekyll.

Alex Saleh (Sir Danvers Carew) – this was a charismatic, warmly paternal presence. Alex was convincing both as a mentor figure to Jekyll and a father to Emma; confidently sung, it was a sensitive performance that in more emotional moments was genuinely moving.

Dominic Bull (Simon Stride) – Dominic was very interesting to watch, creating a complex character with a nasty temper belying his meek appearance. Increasingly sneering and officious, this was a worthy adversary for Jekyll.

Basil Zafiropoulos (General Lord Glossop) – a well-rounded and distinct character, confidently sung and believably portrayed with a volatile edge.

Tadgh Cullen (Bishop of Basingstoke) – Tadgh showed solid command of a very high singing role. We enjoyed his increasingly smarmy and malevolent characterisation, as he was gradually revealed to be the consummate hypocrite.

James-Lee Campbell (Lord Herbert Savage) – one of the more cartoonish members of the Board of Governors, James-Lee provided effective comic relief with an impressive range of facial expressions and good comic timing.

Jennifer Bingham (Lady Beaconsfield) – a haughty and poised performance that was extremely effective and frequently very funny. We'd like to give her bonus points for being the most convincing corpse amongst the murdered board members – she mastered an impressive glassy stare, and was eerily limp as her 'body' was carried offstage. That's the kind of 'corpsing' on stage that we applaud!

Johan Samuelsson (Sir Archibald Proops) – a pleasingly supercilious performance, vain and self-assured. Johan gets extra marks for the most impressive death – he fell with such realistic, leaden speed that he drew gasps from the audience when he hit the ground – goodness knows how he wasn't hurt, but huge plaudits for commitment!

Alexis Rose (Nellie) – this was a smouldering, seductive performance, with super-confident delivery – Alexis had an immediate rapport with the audience. She also boasts a lovely singing voice that was showcased to soulful effect in 'Girls of the Night' – nicely done!

Juan Carlos Alonso (The Spider) – sleazy, oily, and almost Fagin-like in his portrayal, Juan Carlos really inhabited his character. He delivered his lines with a unsettling delicacy that was very effective – one of the most rounded and convincing performances of the night.

Francois Vanhoutte (Poole) – Francois made very good use of a relatively small role, obviously relishing his time on stage. Convincing characterisation and clear delivery – what more could you want?

Siobhan McConnon (Bisset) – Siobhan has created such a distinctive character in Bisset, a real feeling of a 'real' person. She was a strong presence on stage, with a good singing voice that really let rip in 'Girls of the Night'.

Support

Even a production with the most able principals can come apart at the seams if its ensemble isn't up to scratch – but here you had a remarkable wealth of talent backing up the named roles. We were so impressed by the chorus' dancing in particular, and by the extra dance sections that, Cortina told us, were added by the company specifically for this show. The singing was also a treat, with solid, well-executed harmonies – this was particularly noticeable during the a capella harmonies of 'Girls of the Night', which were flawless.

Kudos too for such good, varied characterisation – everyone in the ensemble was interesting to watch, and all were performing with great commitment and energy. This was a tight-knit cast that worked very well together

– there were moments of real magic, see our note about ‘Bring on the Men’ in the ‘choreography’ section for a particular highlight.

Everyone in the ensemble deserves congratulations for their performances, but we would like to give special mention to dance captain Mark Williamson, who was just West End fabulous, combining jaw-dropping dance talent, scene-stealing characterisation (he drew the eye – in a good way! – in every scene he was in), and a great singing voice. Annie Houseago also gets maximum points for fearless audience interaction – her fondling of Simon’s NODA medal as a Red Rat showgirl has to be one of my favourite moments of any show we have been to as reps!

Director

Kelly-Kim Cranstoun sets out a thought-provoking vision for the show in her director’s notes in the programme, exploring how society ‘allowed’ Jekyll’s downfall through fear of standing out – lots of resonance for our own times. The same notes also state that Kelly-Kim was keen to play down differences in physicality between Jekyll and Hyde, instead emphasising that they are two aspects of the same person. This is a really interesting idea to explore psychologically, but on stage it made for a rather unvaried characterisation – and also made it less convincing at key plot points when a character was not meant to recognise Jekyll when Hyde was dominating (particularly Lucy – surely a deeper voice and a different coat should not be enough to disguise the man she loves?).

This was an energetic production that made great use of the full stage space during ensemble numbers, but there was some decidedly unsympathetic blocking in smaller group/solo songs – the Bridewell stage is deep, and this can make the action feel distant if it is set too far from the audience. ‘Take me as I am’ was set extremely far upstage, with a great expanse of empty stage between Jekyll/Emma’s tender duet and us, and it also felt strange to have Emma and Lucy right at the back of the stage during their duet ‘In his eyes’. This sometimes impacted on the balance of singing – in ‘His Work and Nothing More’, poor Utterson was far upstage while Jekyll and Emma, both powerful singers, were set right at the front – as a result, you could hardly hear him. Perhaps mic levels could have been used more effectively to compensate for this, but some of the blocking decisions seemed a little counterintuitive.

Musical Director

Gareth Alber headed a 6-strong band (including himself on Keys 1), and there was also an onstage saxophone. The chorus singing was clearly very well-rehearsed, with confident harmonies, and the principals delivered their solos deftly, but there were some noticeably spotty moments with musical cues going awry and principals coming in in the wrong key – were the band and the singers able to hear each other? The partnership between players and performers did not seem very secure, which was a shame when the musicianship was clearly very skilled.

Choreographer

Hannah McKenna-Vickerstaff has created a fantastic range of choreography for the big ensemble numbers, which played to the strengths of this undeniably talented cast and was endlessly interesting and exciting to watch. We would, though, have liked to have seen some more movement in some of the principal solos/duets – there was quite a lot of static ‘stand and deliver’ in these. However, the ensemble numbers were fantastic, and ‘Bring on the Men’ was showstoppingly wonderful – raw, feral, and decadent, it had the feel of *Cabaret*’s Kit Kat Club, and was carried as much by the chorus energy as by Charlotte Donald’s undeniably great solo work – if this was a film, we would watch this number on repeat.

This section also seems the appropriate place to pay tribute to the stage combat masterminded by Jenny Bingham – dynamic and dramatic, it really enhanced the production.

Stage Management

Charlotte Westrip, assisted by Lisa Baltovich, managed the backstage affairs of the production. Please take it as a compliment that we have little to write in this section – the transitions were mostly very smooth. That said, the occasional scene change was a little slow and fussy, which could have been avoided through better planning/arrangement of the set – there was a moment when, in dismantling Lucy's boudoir, one crew member had to wait while another picked up individual glasses and bottles before they could move a table. It might be more efficient to have these on a tray so that they can be swiftly cleared? But this is a minor point – we really liked the realism of the stage crew carrying/dragging off the dead bodies rather than the 'dead' getting up at the end of their scene and walking to the wings.

Sound

Sound was designed and operated by DRN Theatre Productions. We really liked the ambient noises that played while we were waiting for the show to start – the dripping water and squeaking rats were wonderfully atmospheric. Perhaps we could have had a few more sound effects during the show itself? There was a moment when Hyde broke the neck of one of his victims that would have greatly benefited from a crack or a crunch – grim though that sounds – in silence, it lost a lot of its shock value.

The mics could have been better used to compensate for some unsympathetic moments of blocking when singers were set far upstage, but by and large we did not notice any major problems with the sound balance – neither band nor singers drowned each other out, and dialogue was clearly audible.

Lighting

Designed by Nathan Long, the lighting was sometimes used very effectively – the use of a silhouette to represent Hyde during the 'Confrontation' was particularly nifty – but at other times did not tie obviously to the action, and could be distracting. Nonetheless, this was an ambitious, imaginative, and impressively varied lighting plot.

Set Design

Andrew James has designed a simple but intriguing set, mixing Victorian and modern ideas. Its minimalistic design made it easy to change scenes quickly, and each space was well furnished and interesting to look at. The scrolling 'breaking news' screen was particularly effective, though occasionally the lighting made it difficult to read, and projections designed by Alex Spence were an innovative touch.

Props

Sarah Taylor has assembled a good range of appropriate items, from scientific paraphernalia and books to weaponry and smart phones – it must have been quite the 'shopping list' for her! She has helped to create a believable, immersive world, for which she deserves credit, and her props enhanced the mix of 'old and new' exhibited in the costumes and set.

Costumes

Carly Linder and Laura Barnes' costumes were fairly timeless, combining aspects of the story's traditionally Victorian setting with flashes of the modern day – an effective palette that went well with the similarly mixed set and props. We feel they could have costumed the company's curvier ladies a little more attractively/sympathetically in the Red Rat scenes, but there were some very lovely touches – Emma's

wardrobe in particular was enviably nice, with her gorgeous drapey pink dress and Katherine Hepburn-esque trouser suit, while the kick-ass green ensemble that Lady Beaconsfield was given as evening wear fitted her character perfectly. Thoughtful and creative touches were to be seen throughout.

Programme

Julia Galway-Witham has designed a strikingly attractive programme, with a good consistent colour scheme using sinister blacks and reds that completely fit with the feel of the production. We love rehearsal photos, and the examples included here (taken by Andras Vismeg) are dynamic and interesting to look at. We also liked the 'typewriter' font, though the print was maybe a touch too small to read comfortably on the first couple of pages (though we appreciate there was a lot of artistic information to fit in!). The insights from the creative team were particularly interesting, including the MD's contribution about the adaptation/different versions of the score, and the director's conception of the show. You might like to think about entering it for the Programme and Poster competition, details of which can be found on the NODA website www.noda.org.uk

Front of house

We always look forward to coming to a Centre Stage show, not only because we know we're in for a great production, but because the front of house team are always warm and helpful. Thanks as ever for being so welcoming – we look forward to seeing you soon!

Carly Hilts and Simon Jones

Regional Representatives

NODA London District 1