

Nativity!

The Musical

It was great to visit a new NODA member society – Top Box Studios – for a seasonal show in a rather unusual venue! *Nativity!* was presented in a ‘pop up’ theatre in the middle of Redditch’s Kingfisher Shopping Centre. The space had been ingeniously transformed into a theatre, complete with stage, lighting rig and sound equipment, not to mention seating for an expectant audience, looking forward to an evening of Christmas fun. Top Box Theatre Company has been created to provide opportunities for older children from the established Vocalize group, and this production was a combined effort between the two groups.

Nativity! is a musical based on the film of the same name starring Martin Freeman, and is written by local playwright Debbie Isitt. The show features songs from the movie such as ‘Sparkle and Shine’ and ‘Nazareth’, plus several additional numbers written especially for it. It follows the attempts of lovelorn primary school teacher Paul Maddens to create a nativity play to rival that of his former friend Gordon Shakespeare and win back the love of his erstwhile girlfriend, Jennifer. Aided and abetted by hyperactive man-child Mr Poppy, and despite all appearing lost on more than one occasion, suffice to say that Mr Maddens and his pupils triumph in the end (of course!)

At the centre of *Nativity!* is the double act of Mr Poppy and Mr Maddens – for the show to work it’s essential for these characters to work, and I’m happy to say that they did. Tom Bowes was very good as the effervescent Mr Poppy, but I was also impressed with Sam Goldingay, who was just right in the much less showy role of Paul Maddens. There was a good chemistry between this pair, even extending to the odd ad-lib. As Gordon Shakespeare, the villain of the piece, Aidan McGrath had good stage presence and a nice singing voice. Lilymae Liv confidently carried off the pivotal role of Jennifer, and there was strong support from Connie Dodd as Headmistress Mrs Bevan and Ed Kelly as the feared theatre critic Patrick Burns.

The principals were supported by a wonderful young cast of forty, playing pupils at St Bernadette’s (hooray!) and Oakmoor (boo!) schools, and a variety of other roles in the community and, later, Hollywood. I suppose it should be fairly natural for children to play children, but the challenge of delivering these roles should not be underestimated. A huge well done to all of them – their enthusiasm, discipline and commitment were clear to see. They were every inch the equals of their celluloid equivalents, and it was no mean feat to deliver Mr Maddens’ nativity play for real.

Well done to the Top Box creative team – Tracy Wright, George Evans, Georgie Pearce and Lucy Traves for marshalling such a large cast of young performers through the show. Special congratulations to George, who was directing and stage managing a show for the first time – an excellent effort! Georgie provided some nice choreography, both in the nativity show itself and also on other occasions, such as a well-conceived bus tour of Hollywood. It was great to hear

some live music as well, with well-played keyboard, guitar and drums, directed by Tracy, accompanying the songs. Lucy added valuable assistance in all aspects of the creative process.

There was no set to speak of, just a black curtain with a *Nativity!* banner. I realise that this may have been due to the restrictions of the venue, but it would have been nice to see the odd bit of scenery – such as the ‘Hollywood’ sign, for example. Having said that, there was good use of furniture and props to set the scene from time to time. The limitations of the venue might also have led to a few delays in entrances and exits, although many’s the venue that’s cursed with the queue for the wings!

Costumes were fine – both for the school-set scenes and the nativity itself – I particularly liked the Christmas star’s outfit! Sound and lighting worked well, which was little short of miraculous seeing as it all had to be installed from scratch!

My thanks to Top Box Studios for inviting me to see this show – such a warm welcome, even down to the goody bag of sweets. I suppose that I am now in the role of Patrick Burns, so let me say that was fabulous, well done, five stars! Merry Christmas, everyone!

Chris Davies