

THE COTSWOLD SAVOYARDS

Calamity Jane**The Playhouse Cheltenham****November 6th 2019*****Director: Sheila Ham******Choreographer: Hatty Davis******MD: David Manifold***

This show is popular both with performers and audiences; it has a good age range of roles and some delightful musical numbers, which were the 'pop songs' of their day. It is a favourite with older audiences and I hope younger audiences will be drawn to it. Set in 1876 in Deadwood City, Dakota it centres round Calamity Jane, a most unladylike female, who dresses, rides and shoots like a man, but whose tendency to be 'Careless with the Truth' ends in calamitous situations. The character is based on an actual person Martha Jane Cannery, a frontiers woman and professional Indian scout, who led a colourful and eventful life.

This was a traditional style show with the curtains opening to reveal a well-constructed set of the wooden interior of the Golden Garter Saloon. There was a small stage at the back with a bar up stage right, saloon style swing doors stage left, with a balcony along two sides, which gave a variation in height and was well used. This remained throughout becoming the Ballroom at Fort Scully, with additional set dressing; Adelaide's dressing room was a 'front of tabs' scene; with an inset for Calamity's cabin, with a very clever change when it received 'A Woman's Touch'. The costumes were all, as you would expect of the era, with makeup and hairstyles to match. The props had been well sourced, if only dead flowers could revive that quickly. The sound effects were appropriate and well cued, with good sound balance on the microphones. The lighting had been well designed helping to create the right atmosphere for the various scenes and was well cued.

Musical Director David Manifold had decided to use a reduced orchestra for this more intimate venue and it paid off. They produced lovely music at a good pace, supporting the singers well. This show has such memorable music which the musicians obviously enjoyed playing and cast enjoyed singing. There were well-sung solos and duets and lovely ensemble harmonies. The Black Hills of Dakota was particularly well sung as the ensemble were split either side of the auditorium and then moved across the auditorium and onto the stage whilst still singing. Choreographer Hatty Davis had provided the cast with some lovely moves and routines. Everyone danced with confidence and enthusiasm, with the opening number setting the energy level of the show. There were lovely routines for 'Frances Fryer', the showgirls and Katie Adams, with well controlled dancing at the Ball while 'Love You Dearly' was being sung, which did not divert attention from the singing.

Joy-Amy Wigman in the title role led a cast of talented performers. She was a delight to watch and listen to, it is a demanding role but her energy never flagged, from her animated story telling in 'The Deadwood Stage' to her beautiful rendition in 'My Secret Love' displayed every emotion she experienced as the larger than life gun-toting heroine who has a vulnerable side. Robbie Gardner gave a relaxed performance as Wild Bill Hickock; his calmness was the perfect foil for Calamity's over exuberance, his reactions and facial expressions in 'Careless with the

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Truth' said it all. His duets with Calamity were a delightful contrast from the bickering in 'I Can Do Without You' to the romantic 'My Secret Love'. Amber Smith gave lovely performance as Katie Brown, she was a complete contrast to Calamity, she was feminine, caring, took care with her appearance and was attractive to men. When she was alone in Adelaide's dressing room she sang 'It's Harry I'm Planning to Marry' confidently but when she arrived at The Golden Garter and was confronted by a large crowd at first her confidence evaporated but when she was given a second chance you could see her confidence growing with every note until she gave it her all, she was totally convincing. Her duet with Danny was lovely. For Robert Barton-Ancliffe as Lieutenant Danny Gilmartin, it was obviously love at first sight. His interaction with Wild Bill in the cabin was good. He endured Calamity fussing over him and bandaging his wounds over his coat with stoic impatience. Samuel Taunton had an interesting role as Francis Fryer the song and dance man who is not comfortable about performing to cowboys to start with, and is horrified when he realises he has been mistakenly billed as a female performer, Frances Fryer. He began warming to his new persona until his wig came off, a lovely portrayal. Caroline Kendal captured the two sides of Adelaide Adams well and performed 'It's Harry I'm Planning to Marry' confidently. Millie, Proprietor of The Golden Garter was well portrayed as a nervous individual, only one step away from a nervous breakdown. Heather Gallagher as niece Susan was a very calm and reassuring when all the chaos ensued. Jim Whalley, certainly made the cameo role of Rattlesnake his own, it was a lovely interpretation. Everyone else had worked hard on the singing and dancing and to develop individual characters. As I always say the minor roles and ensemble are so important to a show as nothing would happen without them; there was lots of good interaction and response to what was happening. The whole cast maintained their accents well.

Sheila Ham in her directorial debut had certainly created a lively entertaining show, which everyone had enjoyed being involved with. Everyone was confident in their roles. She had created some lovely pictures; there was plenty of well-timed humour; abundant energy; and she was not afraid to have singers being still when delivering their songs as with Katie and Danny singing 'Love You Dearly' downstage left in their own world, while the dancing at the Ball was happening behind them. The audience really enjoyed their evening and had been well entertained. Congratulations everyone.

Frankie Telford
Regional Representative South West District 15

Any observation made by the reviewer can only be based on what he sees at the performance in question and that the observations made will prove helpful in improving future productions. The reviewer may have received information in advance of the performance and it is inevitable that his assessment will be affected by that knowledge.

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