

A FUNNY THING HAPPENED ON THE WAY TO THE FORUM

Promenade Productions
The Playhouse Theatre, Cheltenham
16th July 2019

Friends, Romans, countrymen, cricketers and astronauts: lend me your ears.

It's been a while, but, following their songfests of recent years, Promenade Productions are back in business with a full-blown summer musical production. Not only that, but in keeping with the 50th anniversary of the Apollo moon landings, they, too, are treading new ground, specifically the Playhouse stage, where they have planted their society flag with renewed pride. They've even broken in company stalwart *Ceri Winrow* as débutante director. Now that's three giant leaps for mankind. Make that four, if you consider their choice of show, *Stephen Sondheim's* quirky Roman romp *A Funny Thing Happened on the Way to the Forum*.

Like him or loathe him, you can't deny that Sondheim is at least original. *Up Pompeii* meets *The Best Little Whorehouse in Texas* in this imperial tale of pimps, petals and potions, a delightful piece of ancient revelry that is a real one-off in the field of musical theatre. With sterling support from the band under musical director *Dave Whittle*, the 19-strong cast soon proved themselves equal to the demanding score, and they were in fine voice during the rousing chorus sequences, although one or two of the principals seemed a tad nervous early on, and some intermittent over-amplification threatened to undo parts of the dialogue.

No matter. *Melanie Warren* radiated sweetness and light as girl-next-door *Philia*, a vision of loveliness who lit up every one of her scenes, as she negotiated the rocky road to marital bliss in the welcoming arms of eventual husband *Hero*, endearingly played by *Jordan Phillpotts*.

Elsewhere on the Appian Way, *Neal Carter-Lewis* provided considerable backbone as the senatorial *Senex*, ably supported by *Maggie Preston* as his dutiful wife *Domina*. Meanwhile, *Sam Taunton* upped the ante as their histrionic chief slave *Hysterium*, *Ben Goodman* commanded all attention as the bombastic army captain *Miles Gloriosus*, and *John Pickup* oozed charisma as *Marcus Lycus*, as he marshalled his glamorous courtesans. Anchoring it all was the capable *Frank Dalton* as the Lurcio-esque narrator *Pseudolus*.

All jolly good fun, and late on it even strayed into the Roman equivalent of Whitehall Farce, as the characters chased each other frantically in all directions and through the overworked doors standing in for the French windows, still several centuries off. That is, when they finally managed to outrun the relentless Proteans, the pilum-wielding neighbourhood watch, who didn't miss a trick keeping the local population in order, whilst also ensuring that no-one was accidentally impaled. *Tom, Jasmin* and *Liz*: take a well-deserved bow.

A funny thing happened at the Playhouse tonight, something very appealing, colourful (and I don't mean the lunar eclipse) and well worth checking out at the old Bath Road forum. Salute!

Simon Lewis