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Group: Betchworth Operatic & Dramatic Society
Show: The Matchgirls
Venue: Betchworth Memorial Hall
Date: 17th November 2023
Director: Alison Cooper
Musical Director: Ian Stone

The Matchgirls, written by Bill Owen and Tony Russell, is a musical about the London matchgirls' strike of 1888. It focuses on the lives of female employees at the manufacturer, Bryant and May; and the dangers and repressions of the callous regime. The musical opened in the West End in March 1966, following try-outs in Leatherhead...not far from Betchworth's production.

The hall was crowded and cosy and I received a very warm welcome from Neil Mayall.

The set was simply furnished with brick walls, to resemble the mean streets around Bow. The cast moved furniture smoothly and props were efficiently used. Lighting was generally good, but a bit uneven on Stage Left.

Women's costumes were very appropriate to the period and to the characters' status. Men's outfits were generally limited to waistcoats and flat caps...but George Bernard Shaw got a jacket !

Ian Stone provided excellent solo accompaniment to all the songs, on his smart new keyboard.

The opening song was *Phosphorous*, a cynical ensemble number by the matchgirls.

Sarah Esser-Haswell as Mrs Purkiss sang a good lead in *Look At That Hat*, and maintained a strong character in the show. The ginger girl was *very* funny in this number...good lord...it was Diane Mayall as Min ! She too kept a strong personality throughout.

Look Around was a chilling song by Kate and chorus, as they reviewed their environment. Kelly Cross was excellent in her singing and her portrayal of Kate, a character who is torn between her love for Joe and her desire to improve working conditions for the matchgirls. This is a massive singing and speaking part and Kelly did it proud.

Joe her paramour (Stephen Tickell) sang *Me*: a tricky song presented with humour. He was attentive to Kate and they sang the delightful duets: *Life of Mine* and *Something About You*...followed in this number by Winny and Bert. These two celebrated their wedding with the jolly number *Mind You Bert*.

My Dear Lady was a gentle duet that covered the correspondence between Kate and Mrs Besant.

Men was a nice duet by Kate and Polly (Jane Khan); and then a smooth intervention by Joe and Perce (Peter Telford).

La Di Dah featured the ensemble going "Up West" for a spree. It was fun and beautifully crisp and clear.

As if things couldn't get worse for the women, they'd taken up with men who were more interested in their racing pigeons. Joe had the additional distraction of Jessie (Christina Usher) who was very seductive and very persistent.

ACT I finished with a very lively song, *We're Gonna Show 'Em*, with the strikers marching on Parliament.

Cockney Sparrers was ACT II's lively opening number, with amusing rhyming lines.

Comes a Time was a lovely number that built up with some attractive harmonies.

Amendment to a Motion was a great comic song on the language of meetings...with a good solo by Min.

And as for the toffs, Jane Seymour made Mrs Besant an enthusiastic and credible crusader, whilst Julian Edney's GBS bagged all the one-liners.

Waiting was an atmospheric ensemble number. And then...

Happy ending ! The girls win the strike, Joe returns to Kate and there's a joyful reprise of *Life of Mine* to finish.

It's something of a challenge to present a lively musical based on such a horrible time and situation. BODS succeeded admirably, thanks to excellent characterisation throughout and a high standard of singing. Director, Alison Cooper, made excellent use of the stage & the whole hall and brought the action to the audience.

Thank you for a friendly welcome and an enjoyable evening.

Graham Botterill