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**ROSE BOWL ADJUDICATION**

Name of Society:  **Bristol Musical Youth Productions**

Name of Production: **‘STARLIGHT EXPRESS’**

Date: 29 March 2017

Venue:The Bierkeller Theatre, Bristol

Adjudicator: Clare Toghill

Andrew Lloyd-Webber created ‘Starlight Express’ from an idea based upon the ‘Cinderella Story’…’ in which Rusty stands for Cinderella; Greaseball and Electra become the Stepsisters and the Starlight Express is the Fairy Godmother.

‘The West End Production, directed by Trevor Nunn and Choreographed by Arlene Phillips opened on 27th March 1984 at the Apollo Victoria theatre…. (taken from the programme).

It was a true spectacle and I can personally remember the race track skimming the upper balcony of the seating in the auditorium. It was exhilarating to see the performers whizz past at high speeds. Another highlight for me was Electra’s entrance. The culmination of the ACDC intro, the laser lighting, the ramp emerging from the depths of the stage … and then his decent down the ramp … it was a lot to take in and it was all so new and exciting.

I was unsure as to how that excitement could be re-created by a Youth Theatre Company on a fraction of the budget. I needn’t have worried - BMYP pulled it off - in a BIG way!

**PRESENTATION/ SETTING – DESIGN AND DÉCOR:** upon entering the venue, it was immediately evident that this is a risk-taking and vibrant kind of Youth Theatre Society. There aren’t many theatre groups who would take the plunge to shift from their very lovely and comfortable proscenium -arched theatre space in leafy Clifton and decide to stage their latest production in a working, nightclub theatre in the heart of the city. What a decision! The setting was absolutely perfect for this show; the quirky pockets of space enhanced with neon lighting, the rough cave-like texture of the walls and the dark, secret atmosphere enabled the audience to forget the outside world and focus upon the story of Rusty, Electra and co. This lack of formality meant that the audience was able to let go and feel the elation of watching ‘trains’ whizz past them on the ‘track’ which bordered the seating area. The underground space enabled the lighting department to go wild with neon, strobe, blazing and contrasting colours and the acoustics were fabulous as the band played good and loud.

We were fully transported for the duration of this show and I commend this society for venturing out and sourcing a venue which although foreign to them, truly suited their show and enabled them to showcase their efforts with authenticity.

**LIGHTING: Tom Boase, assisted by Adam Greenslade:** The lighting states were consistently punchy and confident; this is a firecracker of a show to light and this department certainly did not disappoint. There were magenta footlights built into the rostra and foil-covered towers which marked the boundaries of the race track; this added a super, industrial feel. Many times, the overhead lights dazzled in multi-colours. Neon lights and performers draped in fairy lights indicated the grand entrance of Electra. The projector screen played us the ‘race’ – a pre-recorded close up of the racers, and was used to conjure up the illusion of real-time details of each race. The images on screen were perfectly sharp and clear and the lighting balance during these moments was spot on. For Poppa’s Blues, the lighting was simplified to reds and blues and this was very effective. Act Two commenced with bellows of dry ice in red lighting for the Rap. There was a huge atmosphere of excitement created here and the lights most definitely contributed to this. All of the cues were impeccably delivered. Well done to this department.

**SOUND AND EFFECTS: Martin Harper, assisted by Maria Harper, Bernadette Tucker, Wendy Hughes:** The overture was rousing and set the tone and pace for the entire show. The volume of the orchestra was a little loud at the start, which made it difficult for us to hear all of the Boy’s/Control’s words. This minor issue didn’t continue, however. The sound was loud and intoxicating throughout and all of the mics worked perfectly. Well done – a very slick output.

**COSTUME: Sheila Eastwood, Sheri Kohn:**  Where do I start?! This production was costumed so perfectly, that I could praise this department for a long, long time!! The essence of the original production and concept was certainly adhered to, as well it should be, because we are dealing with a well-loved show here, and with that comes iconic and recognisable characters. Each and every detail was here; a beautiful concoction of recycled-looking industrial, workable wear that identified trains, coaches, components and trucks. Shoulder pads were exaggerated and trimmed with foam tubing, plastic recycled parts, sequinned fabrics, fringing, tassels, even lights. The coaches looked sassy and colourful with their short, skater skirts over lycra tights and fitted jackets with shoulder pads in various materials. The Trains’ appearances matched their names and or nationalities. So much attention to detail had gone into the realisation of these costumes. The Trucks took on a more industrial and masculine feel, with larger, plastic additions on their jackets and arms. The Components were flirty and cute in their silver, orange, pink and black outfits and matching wigs. The Wardrobe Department for this show relied upon the goodwill and free time of the Parents and friends of the Company, to make these stunning costumes from scratch. An absolutely fabulous input from this department – well done.

**HAIR & MAKE UP: Jayne James, assisted by Sandie Bidwell, Lorna Hayles, Charlie Barnsley, and more:** Once again, an amazing input from everyone. The hairstyles and wigs design was fearless and had to incorporate fascinating headgear, even lighting. Most performers wore wigs, which were eccentric, bright and colourful. The make-up was extraordinarily good. Each individual wore make-up distinctive of their character; there were over-exaggerated eyes painted in all colours of the rainbow, neon lips, lightning strikes on cheeks, metallic outlines on foreheads … it was all fabulous.

**STAGE MANAGEMENT: Jon Richer:** Hats off to this department. The entire show was slick, perfectly cued and very professional as a result. There would have been numerous safety checks to deal with for each performance and yet all ran smoothly. Everything tied in seamlessly together to create a fabulous spectacle. Well done.

**MUSIC/ORCHESTRA/MUSICAL DIRECTION: Kerrie Duce:** This well-known score came to life right before us. It was well-rehearsed and slick. The performers kept the tricky timing well and the Orchestra sounded fabulous, on the highest platform, hidden behind a cut-out skyline. The numerous train sounds were perfect.

**DIRECTION: Vicki Klein, assisted by Chris Parslow:** How refreshing to watch a show where the ENTIRE cast can adopt the American accent with accuracy and flair! This is no mean feat and the Directing Team must be congratulated for ensuring that this was the case, as it is often over-looked. The races were very well-constructed, with the racing trains and carriages getting prepared with their safety goggles and adrenalin pumping, as the projector screen came down into place behind them, ready to show the pre-recorded, close-ups of the racers. Whilst this was happening, the racers sped around the track in the auditorium, which was exhilarating to watch so close-up. The casting was spot-on and the use of space was a real treat; the show didn’t ever seem to stand still. Its lyrical fluidity just kept on delivering. The subtle nuances of emotion between the characters were always identified and brought out. Many emotions were at play here and all of them were sensitively handled.

**SINGING:** Obviously skating and singing simultaneously is never going to be easy to achieve yet here, the breathing control of each and every performer was absolutely spot-on. ‘Locomotion’ was stunning; here we could hear the harmonies as clear as day with voices which sustained true clarity and tone; these are the maturing voices of tomorrow; look after them and you will please many an audience as you did this evening. There was a lovely sparkle in their voices and faces and the teamwork was evident here. Freight really was great, as this was a strong number, with perfectly tuneful and harmonised singing parts. The contrast between the girls and boys singing parts was instantly recognisable and much appreciated. There were many moments which required tight ensemble singing, for example, “On the rails”…and this was achieved each time. In particular, the Starlight Express whole-cast numbers were very rousing and poignant. The performers worked tightly together and this resulted in very polished and focused performances all round. To kick-off Act 2, The Rap went straight in for the kill and a huge atmosphere was created, with Greaseball, Rusty and Electra getting the crowd clapping. ‘Rusty Alone’ and the’ Starlight Sequence’ were both moving numbers and the cast sang out in unison beautifully, “Rusty, you’re blind – look in your mind”. ‘Love Song’ was beautiful and Pearl’s technical ability was very pleasing. ‘There’s a Light at the End of the Tunnel’ was a rousing, hand-clapping affair. The audience was enraptured as the cast spread out along the race tracks to sing close-up to the audience members. The cast didn’t let the ball drop for a single second.

**MOVEMENT AND DANCE: Vicki Klein:** This is obviously a challenging show to choreograph. The performers required skating tuition and coaching and there were all of the levels and various floor-coverings to contend with. Not only that, but the actually choreography demands that the performers are agile, nimble, powerful and full of conviction when delivering each move. This is such an iconically stylised piece that the dancing really must deliver…and BMYP did just that! The formations, (and there were many), were perfectly formed; each gesture and each lunge was punchy and isolated and deftly done. The timing of the dance moves was perfect and considering that most of the choreography was executed on skates, it is easy to appreciate just how much dedication was required from each and every performer on stage. This was very much a team effort and no-one let the side down. The adrenaline was tangible as the performers swooped around corners, or sailed across the acting space on their skates. At times, the performers changed into flat dancing shoes, but this was very subtly handled. ACDA saw several girls in soft shoes popping in unison on the raised rostra; this was a sexy and confident number. The rock ‘n Roll numbers saw the dancers moving in alternating rows with much style and conviction. The arm extensions were pleasing all-round and this attention to detail never goes to waste! ‘Pumping Iron’, saw lots of boxing moves and dancers moving carefully in lines and then in circles around Greaseball as they looked on with adoring sighs. Hand-jiving movements worked well, as the dancers moved lightly from side to side across to upper level of rostra. The line dancing steps of the Country Styled U.N.C.O.U.P.L.E.D, were executed neatly and daintily by the girls on the rostra; this number was a winner. ‘Right Place, Right Time’, saw the boys skate in a star formation – which was impressive and showcased the team skills that this theatre company has in abundance.

**SKATE TUTORING: Max Davies, Liam Charlton:** I was informed that the cast rehearsed for a total of six weeks … just six weeks! This was a huge accomplishment; hats off to their skating tutors, for instilling in the performers an obvious confidence and love of skating. The demise of the racers during Race 4, was expertly choreographed; slapstick wobbling and falling occurred on the track and the stage and it looked super. There was an absolutely fine-tuned use of space throughout this production.

**THE CAST**

**Greaseball: Eddie Groves:** A strong characterisation here. His early words, “Bye bye, Rusty”, enabled us to see the trajectory along which this character would travel throughout the evening. He was cocky in his ‘Fonzey’ wig and this made him instantly likable yet made us wary too. ‘Pumping Iron’ was a super number, culminating in, “Man, I’m so beautiful”. Later his line, “Oooh, that’s nasty”, during the taunting of Rusty was well-delivered. In, ‘One Rock ‘n’ Roll Too Many’ his line, “My chains are too heavy and my pants are too tight”, was an absolute gem! His comic timing was effortless.

**TRAINS**

The female, flagged skaters were most attractive and instantly recognisable in their various multi-national attire. These trains were the ambassadors for their counties and the performers did a fabulous job here; it was an exciting opening to proceedings, when they zoomed in on their skates, elegantly and regally waving their flags as they smiled and set the tone for the whole evening. Do not be afraid to smile more, though, girls.

**Amelie: Matilda Durant:** Here we had another attractive and proficient skater, who was unafraid to zip around the track during races. This was exhilarating to watch.

**Bianca: Grace Kerfoot:** This was a noticeable performance; she was comfortable skating and singing and she looked super.

**Electra: Josh Fudge/Isaac Lewis:** He had a good first entrance and a strong singing voice; be sure to watch the timing and phrasing of all of your first song. He was a competent skater and a charismatic Lead. He often skated to DSR and leant against a pillar, in the most arrogant fashion, which was most fitting of this character. His distaste for Rusty was clearly shown by the sneer he adopted on his face whenever he was near him.

**Poppa: Josh Jones:** What a voice! What a performer! This characterisation was one of the highlights of the entire show. “I was a champion once. Yes I was”…this was fabulous. His solo was brimming with charisma and sparkle as he belted out the Blues in a big and beautiful voice. The applause at the end of this song was testament to how fantastic it was – the audience loved it. Poppa spoke using crystal-clear diction, and a lovely, rich tone. His facial expressions were full of animation and purpose. He sang his more clichéd lines with total charm that he received many laughs from the crowd. He had a natural ability to ad-lib, “Oh my!” and the like and this energy really added to the overall dynamic and atmosphere created by the cast as a whole. His admission that his racing days were done, was heartfelt and then he lifted the mood by referring to Belle and adding, “…can’t take the weight”. This was a superb performance. Well done.

**Atari: Jasmine Shattock:** This was a graceful and elegant Train; she would glide delicately around the space, looking poised and fabulous.

**Rusty: Toby Brewer:** From the instant he entered the acting space with his, ‘Wooo-wooo’s’, we knew that we were in extremely safe hands with this principal role. Rusty really needs to win the audience over, if we are to engage with him and follow him on this journey and Toby did just that. This was a convincing portrayal and he had us in the palm of his hand. Rusty is the well-loved under-dog of this story and for that to be achievable, we need to witness his vulnerability and determination in equal measure. Toby ensured that this was the case for us. His vocals were at times outstanding and he had the ability to sustain the lengthy, final notes of his solos with passion and flair. He was absorbed and focused throughout. The pain on his face as he watched Pearl try to make up her mind was clear to read. His quiet, “I’ll take Poppa’s place”, was sensitive and meaningful and in turn made the chorus quieten – this was a powerful moment. Rusty possessed a wonderful story-telling quality to his voice. His ongoing search for the Starlight Express was tangible and beautiful. Rusty’s ‘Alone’ solo was extremely moving and his heartfelt cry to Starlight Express was soulful. His sweet, “I won’t let you down”, provided yet another touching moment. Very well done.

**Nikita: Lottie Maggs:** Looking the part, she attacked this role with energy and smiles. This was a confident performance.

**Angela: Lola Milson:** Another good performance; the energy was there. Don’t be afraid to look up and out and to smile a little more.

**COACHES**

**Pearl: Anna Birakos:** This was a superb characterisation and her USA accent was, in particular very pleasing. She was charming beguiling and pouty as the spoilt, First-Class coach. Her movements and expressions were often suggestive; but only slightly so; this was an intelligently put-together role. She was dainty and poised with excellent posture; and this goes a long way. Her singing voice was powerful and very easy on the ear. Her skating was proficient and so we felt very safe with her as a leading lady of this show. Her use of space came very naturally to her and she oozed confidence in this role. Her doubts of Rusty’s competence were cute. On realising that electric trains don’t whistle, her face crumpled and her crestfallen expression was endearing. ‘Make up my Heart’, was beautifully realised. The fall to her knees, which she executed in Race 4, was brave and very effective.

**Dinah: Ruby Loftus:** Here we had an exuberant character with a superb, bluesy voice. Rich, was her vocal tone and endearing were her facial expressions and gestures implying her insecurities and fears. She was very cute when coupled with Greaseball; wide-eyed and fluttery. Dinah didn’t flicker out of character for a single second. U.N.C.O.U.P.L.E.D was utterly fabulous! This is a big show voice; put that together with her cutesy moves and vulnerability and you have a top-notch performance. Dinah’s Disco was another superb number.

**Buffy: Tasha Tomlinson:** Another good performance. Her voice was strong and her facial expressions were pleasing. She worked very well alongside her fellow Coaches.

**Cassie: Lizzie Howe:** This was a very expressive performer. Her skating skills were very impressive and she flew confidently around the race track throughout the show. She sang with clarity and power. This was a very focussed and engaging performance.

**Belle: Tess Allison:** Here was another powerful voice. Her harmonies and accompaniment to Pearl’s, ‘Make up my Heart’, were wonderful. She stood with poise as she sang just a little way behind Pearl. Her own song was fabulous; she hit all of the high notes with ease and skill, as she skated around the auditorium, bringing her words to life.

**Rosie: Scarlett Last:** Another strong, high-energy performance. Rosie was all smiles and she wasn’t afraid to look up and out at the audience.

**TRUCKS**

**Axle: Craig Bidwell:** Here was another pleasing characterisation. His comic timing was good and he didn’t lose energy at all throughout the performance.

**Rocky 1: Ben Kenna, Rocky 2: Joel Jervis, Rocky 3: Malachy O’Callaghan:** These guys were brilliant! Lines like, “Bye-Bye, Bum” were delivered with style and well-received by the audience. They were almost bumbling and sweet at times. When Poppa made an entrance, the Rocky boys sat around him at his feet, in awe and this was very endearing. Their joint mocking of Rusty was great.

**Red Caboose: Jack Courtiour:** This was another powerful characterisation. His singing voice added an edge to his performance, “Call on me”, was superb. His ability to tell a story was clear. His stage fighting skills were impressive.

**Flat Top: Isaac Lewis/ Josh Fudge:** This was a very expressive performance. Flat Top got his groove on when Poppa sang the Blues; his facial expressions were superb. The focus didn’t fade for a second.

**Dustin: Max Brewer:** He was a very amiable character, with his slightly self-deprecating comments. His upper body movements were stylised and laboured, which was in-keeping with this character. His facial expressions were super.

**COMPONENTS**

**Sparkle: Amelia Battersby, Purse: Emily Chaffe, Joules: Cara Jervis, Volta: Kibibi White, Elana: Aimee Chaffe, Elisa: Issy Ledgard, Erika: Thea Rickard, Ella: Ellie Carter,Angela: Lola Milson:** These girls did a great job throughout. They looked fabulous with their brightly-coloured hair and metallic and pink costumes. They worked seamlessly as an ensemble and they executed their dance moves with fluidity and charm. They didn’t let the energy levels drop for a second. Their intros were clear and exciting.

**Control Boy: Guy Rudin:** This beautifully clear voice sang ‘Starlight’ in the warm night light of his bedroom. This was most pleasing. “We’re here to race”…the regular voice-overs were very commanding and he used that almost other-worldly voice, with plenty of upward-inflection, which fans of this show would instantly recognise. A super job.

**EFFORT, ORIGINALITY AND ATTAINMENT:** Wow! What a show! What a treat! It was a risky business to stage this particular show - from so many angles - the songs are tricky, the characterisations are unusual; the physical endurance needed to stage this show is right up there …. then there is the matter of roller skating throughout – and singing at the same time. There is also the need for a very subtle and mature comic timing to be employed and the excitement of several races to be drummed-up, the list goes on …

Well, let it be said, that BMYP have outdone themselves here. This was a tour de force that really did leave the audience wanting more. Each and every facet of this show was superb. The dedication and focus was unfaltering and the final result was that they managed to produce and perform an absolutely top class production. Well done for taking the necessary risks. It is crucial for Youth Theatre Companies to try new material and push themselves in new directions. There is so much support for them out there.

We want you to do well. We want you to be inspired. We want you to become the new stars of tomorrow and where better to start to learn your trade than in exciting societies such as yours?

To all involved in this show – congratulations on an outstanding, collective achievement. Team work will get you everywhere. Be grateful and delighted that you have such strong support and leadership within your company and finally, enjoy every minute of your time together.

***Thank you for your most kind hospitality and I wish you every success with your next production, CLARE TOGHILL***