

## **CODS**

**'Made in Dagenham' The Musical**

**Queens Hall Theatre, Cranbrook**

**26<sup>th</sup> October 2023**

**Directors: Wendy Thomas & Angela Wright**

**Musical Director: Ian Harby**

**Choreographer: Briony Chaplin-Mabbutt**

This is a musical that surprised me for I wasn't a fan of the original film version based on the true story from 1968 when a group of hardworking female machinists at the Ford Motor Company based in Dagenham had the bottle to stand up for the right to equal pay when their jobs had been reclassified as unskilled. They were taking home far less than their men counterparts which with determination led to the passing of the Equal Pay Act of 1970.

Set design and construction was headed by Kas Page. A scaffold of two towers with steps to a gallery across was set at the rear of the stage with a central screen used for the 'Ford' logo prominent and using back projection to show many locations - a '60's kitchen, poignant hospital signage, Eastbourne Pier, Big Ben, the new Ford Cortina launch too, plus use of small pieces of furniture which were moved quietly and efficiently. Factory sewing tables complete with machines and stools worked exceptionally with the girls slickly placing them. The two stage extensions were well utilised for action in the home of Jeremy and Lisa Hopkins one side and Management Offices the other, all managed so efficiently by much experienced SM – first with CODS - Julie Hine and her assistants.

Musically Ian Hardy with his professionalism had prepared his singers well was both conductor of the balanced 7-piece band and played keyboard. Good sound and tucked away backstage.

The technical side was complex with many, many sound cues well-co-ordinated using the expertise of Sound Designer Jay Christie and operated by Penny Tobin with her usual efficiency and dedication – also responsible for the correct era make-up. John Sewell set the wonderful lighting design with some extra atmospheric effects skillfully operated by versatile Will Stoneham now working with Theatre Manager Kester at the Queens Hall.

Full of strong language but with much humour, tinged with struggle, perseverance, and belief Samantha Tomlinson gave an impressive debut performance for CODS in both her acting and vocals. As Rita O'Grady she transformed with real strength from housewife and loving mother of two, growing into a force to be reckoned with being inspired by the older Union Shop Steward Connie who was sympathetically played by Sharon Pickles. Union Shop Steward Monty, secretly in love with Connie sadly not reciprocated, tries to reason with the girls with John Wright creating a touching moment on Connie's death. Another debut performance came from Tony Chase as Rita's husband Eddie who is torn between love and his fellow workers and performs a moving number 'The Letter'. Their children were Amy

Hine also Principal Dancer with Ben Clarke as Sharon and Graham. The individual characters of the girls opening with wicked quick exchanges of their overnight experiences were very funny indeed and the expletives, particularly from Beryl were delivered superbly by natural comedienne Siana Weston. They worked well as a team and choreography was sharp together with strong harmonic vocals. The men too had some great characters all most effectively portrayed – again slick and the volume and intonation good. The contrasts of the Hopkins – management, with wife label frocked highly qualified historian Lisa but supportive to Rita, was played most convincingly by Katie Kember acting rather than directing on this occasion paired with now hooked on drama Steve Lenham as a perfectly suited MD Mr Hopkins. Multi accented Richard Gray became American Ford Executive Tooley come loud cowboy in a fast moving ‘This is America’ scene and doubling as Mr Buckton. Cortina Man was just great as David Leaper gave his all! Another fine newcomer to CODS was Debbie Katis giving a strong and confident portrayal of Barbara Castle, never losing her accent singing a powerful ‘Ideal World’. The ‘Gannex’ coat and pipe, the signature of Harold Wilson a role played with much humour by Frank Shepherd another first into the world of am dram although not with his singing experience. Not all the cast is mentioned I know but there were delightful cameo parts as well as good choreography executed and created by Briony as well as her programme and poster design.

The Wardrobe Department created a colourful array of 60’s fashion with some fine examples of footwear to match and loved the American scene in particular Elvis and the Spaceman, colourful rah-rah girls, and glitter for the launching of the new Cortina.

A high energy finale ‘Stand Up’ concluded this funny, moving, and well-polished team effort production. To all those involved and unseen folk thank you for the experience, taking me back again in time remembering events and eating in a Berni Inn!

This report will be posted on the NODA website shortly.

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