

REVIEWS – 'Sweethearts' and 'The Hooligan' – May 2017

BRIGHTON ARGUS

"W.S.Gilbert's straight plays have long been eclipsed by Savoy theatre libretti but, thanks to Brian Mitchell and The Foundry Group, they are making a cautious foray back into the limelight. "Sweethearts' and 'The Hooligan', supported by the Lantern Theatre were produced for the Fringe and the double bill offered powerful drama and much food for thought. 'Sweethearts' tells an improbable tale of young love paralysed by an emotional frigidity so inhibiting that it took thirty years to declare itself: although unlikely today, the fact remains that we still don't always say what we mean. Emma Wingrove was delightful as Jenny, her expressive face telling us what her voice never could. Lloyd Ryan -Thomas played the silly ass to perfection, Olivia Sewell was the sweet voiced Ruth and Marcus McConnell the troublesome old gardener. Darker in tone was 'The Hooligan' which explored Gilbert's familiar fascination with crime and punishment. Ryan -Thomas, in very altered guise, with Nick Bartlett as straight up contrast, showed how fear can be the worse fate of all. Gilbert adored the theatre and even if slightly dated, the combination of women, words and wit is irresistible."****

Louise Schweitzer.

REMOTE GOAT

"Unknown W.S Gilbert plays revealed"

by [Sascha Cooper](#) for remotegoat on 07/05/17

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We tend to think of light operettas when Gilbert and Sullivan are mentioned. What not many people are aware of is that Gilbert wrote short stories and plays that ranged from light hearted comedies, to drama that makes you think. 'Sweethearts and The Hooligan' fits into those particular categories and gives you a different perspective into the amazing mindset of Gilbert when not writing opera.

Sweethearts deals with a simplistic surface topic of unrequited love, but goes further by exploring what happens psychologically when we put our hearts on the line. The symbology of the sycamore tree shows the lovers' emotional growth over time, no matter how clumsy it gets. Despite this piece taking too long to warm up comedy wise, all actors involved were strong and committed to the punchlines and character development. Lloyd Ryan Thomas in particular brought to the table a young Nigel Havers flavoured character Henry Spreadrow, who displayed pomposity, youthful arrogance and charm as he tried to tell Jane Northcott (played brilliantly by Emma Wingrove) how he loved her. Move forward a few years and we see how they change. But it may have been slightly better had we seen a little more ageing on their faces to show time passing. Apart from that, this was a beautifully performed piece.

Then we moved from one extreme to the other with The Hooligan. Set in a prison cell, it explores Solly's final hours before he is condemned to hang. Once again Lloyd Ryan Thomas displayed great versatility by becoming a common thief, but sometimes his words were swallowed with shouting too much in places when he could have just emphasised some of the script more.

A special mention has to go to two cast members. Marcus McConnell and Nick Bartley. They really showed their integrity as actors in their pivotal roles. Marcus as Wilcox in Sweethearts and Warder 1 in The Hooligan really showed versatility and focus in both roles keeping the audience entertained. Nick however was harsh, realistic and militant as he put Solly through his paces and the harsh reality of life versus death in a scary situation.

Olivia Sewell shone as Ruth the maid in Sweethearts. She not only had an amazing voice, but showed a certain fluid open book as she enabled the transition between the two halves with both acting and song.

With little tweaks to be had, Sweethearts and The Hooligan is a well put together double bill. Certainly set to be a great fringe success.

FRINGEREVIEW

Rating 'MUST SEE SHOW'

Low Down

| *Two plays by W.S Gilbert are successfully revived by The Foundry Group.*

Review

Two plays, penned by W.S Gilbert are brought successfully to the Lantern Theatre stage by the Foundry Group. You may not know that Gilbert (of Gilbert and Sullivan, the operetta duo) was not only a librettist, but also an acclaimed playwright, poet, illustrator and writer of ballads.

Here we have two very different plays that explore themes that are still relevant today, and hard-hitting for different reasons. Sweethearts looks at love over the years, at memory and and both plays explore how we revise history. The Hooligan takes us to the last moments of a prisoner about to meet the executioner. Sweethearts is a gentler offering, an often painfully funny two-hander. Far more than historical artefacts, The Foundry Group have revived these plays because they represent strong writing: they are dialogue plays that both entertain and furrow the brow. The company has brought them to the stage in a way that preserves the historical style and content, yet has made them accessible to a modern audience.

You might think you've seen this all before, but what you're actually seeing is this 'after'. This work came decades before Oscar Wilde, or an Alan Ayckbourn. These writers of over 100 years ago today have influenced the writers who followed them in ways they may not even be aware of. Here we have plays which explore the human condition and the painful ways in which we attempt to deal with it, through drama, dialogue, and dark comedy. Love, regret, loss, guilt, anger, frustration, the climb of years – it's all here. We also have some very direct delivery, crisp staging and plenty of knockabout dialogue. Silence is also well employed, especially in the Hooligan. Stillness, gentle portrayal sits alongside some shattering physicality. As we try to remember. As we express our frustration and regret. As we prepare for our final moments...

Acting is of a uniformly top notch standard, the production does not reek of stagecraft. These plays do well on the small Lantern stage. This is quintessential Fringe, yet both plays would more than hold their on at the Theatre Royal.

I will not give away any of the plot. from these two well chosen pieces. It is exactly in the nature of the contrasting material that places them so well together on the Fringe. The plays are unlikely bedfellows yet they are all the better for it. We have contrast and overlaps, as dark humour mixes with some very dark drama. Dark comedy was at the heart of much Gilbert and Sullivan work and it is more than in evidence here.

There is deft direction from Brian Mitchell. One sign of good directing and acting that you believe the characters before you have lives outside of the script. That was certainly the case here. I want to congratulate the cast for fine performances in both pieces, for simple and accessible direction and

production. As generous, whole-hearted and full-bodied theatre from a time gone by that more than holds its own in the twenty-first century, this is a must-see.

Published May 18, 2017 by [Paul Levy](#)