



Society : East Berkshire Operatic Society
Production : Avenue Q
Date : 7th – 11th May 2019
Venue : Wilde Theatre
Report by : Susan Boobyer-Pickles

[Show Report](#)

While I knew the bones of the story and have seen many clips of Avenue Q over the years, I have never seen it in its entirety, and I was absolutely delighted when EBOS announced they would be performing the show. Clearly this would be a high quality production and all I can say is I was not disappointed. There is a certain joy at seeing something that is meant to shock, surprise and make you laugh out loud – very loud! So, before anything else, may I say I had the best evening and really from start to finish this was a blue print on how to present a wonderful show.

Unusually, the set was designed and built in house rather than using the services of the theatre which for me made it even better. A double storey house frontage with working doors, windows, back yard entrance and alleyway looked rock solid as it had to be with the various puppets lurching out of doors and windows. There were also clever little tricks to create small subsets such as the “pull out” lounge and the club - all size appropriate. The many small touches really made a difference including the side street bench and the Bansky “balloon girl” artwork. I thought the use of the balcony was thoughtful and came into its own when representing the Empire State Building – very clever. This set designed by **Duncan Bruce** showed real skill and understanding of what was required to put on this work allowing actors/puppets to move freely from scene to scene without any bottlenecks. Duncan and the whole team involved should be congratulated. As discussed on the night if you have photography available, I would be very happy to put Avenue Q forward for the 2019/2020 Scenic Award.

While we are on the subject Duncan should also be congratulated on the design of the programme and advertising materials – the programme was informative and produced to the high standards expected from EBOS and I am sure you will be submitting them for consideration at next year’s awards.

Natalie Hayllor and Abi Rose assembled a good selection of stage and setting props none of which looked out of place. It’s not clear what comes as part of the puppet package, but I believe you did make your own set of “singing boxes”. Particularly cute were the small bed setting and the small armchair and table - either way all items were brilliant and perfect for the scenes.

Costume is not the biggest thing in this show as most of the main human actors are in black – all appropriate though – Natalie ensured the other humans were all well-dressed especially Caretaker Gary Coleman as Christmas Eve.

This show is heavy on music and EBOS had assembled a small band who played brilliantly throughout under the direction of **Mark Webb**. We don’t see the band and so we are left to just enjoy the beautiful sound and let it wash over us. I totally commend you all for creating such a lovely and tuneful sound which melded so well with the voices. Mark and the cast must have worked hard to master all of the songs especially as the cast had to develop and fine tune voice styles and accents

throughout. With a hidden orchestra/band we the audience cannot publicly applaud your effort and skill so please take this as your public accolade and be assured the audience loved the music.

Going hand in hand of course are the tech teams and **Tom Horrox** clearly did a great job. There were no major problems except for a slight glitch with the radio mic worn by Gary Colman. The overall sound was clear, bright and well balanced.

The lighting designed by **Michael Brenkley** and operated by **Steve Davies** was thoughtful and colourful. For most of the time the stage was brightly lit but when required there was some lovely and precise spotting, I also liked the lovely dappled wash on the house. Good use of colour as required and a lovely effect was created for the Empire State Building when on the balcony. I am not a fan of overly used haze but in this production there was a good and limited usage which created some nice effects in some of the scenes.

All the technical and production aspects came together brilliantly in this production and the end result was top quality. Director **Luke Burton** must have been happy with the end result and the effort put in by everyone. Bringing a show like this to life cannot be easy when there is so much pre-conception about how it looks, sounds and works. I know that the cast had rehearsal puppets but I can only assume they were a far cry from using the production puppets. Having to direct the actor, the puppetry and the voices could be daunting but Luke clearly relished the challenge with the assistance of **Erin Hope Pharo** as Choreographer and brought this iconic show to full technicolour glory. While not a dancy show there was good movement around the stage and some very stylised movement which I am sure Erin contributed to with her wealth of experience.

To avoid repeating myself I was very impressed with the connection between all the actors and their puppets. All the actors seemed to meld with their puppet persona and honestly after a short time it was very easy to focus on the puppet. I loved the mirroring of action and of expression between human and puppet and it was amazing to see the different emotion even though the puppets were very simple in their movement options – although I suspect they weren't easy to operate!! All the tiny details were well executed such as the up/down movement of the puppets when walking on/off stage and all the many expressive gestures created by the puppeteers. Fabulous work by everyone.

Zac Abbott / Princeton

A wonderfully confident performance from start to finish. Zac has an amazing singing voice and managed to create and maintain a really authentic accent. Lovely connection between him and his puppet in "Purpose" and great co-ordination with the Purpose Boxes.

Nicki Jones / Kate Monster

Nicki also has a wonderful singing voice and like Zac created a wonderful melding with her puppet. I think that Kate Monster is a bit uppity and there was a nice correlation in Nicky and the puppet giving off this feeling of ever so slightly standoffishness. "There's a Fine, Fine Line" was really powerfully sung and acted

Zac and Nicki were perfectly paired and their shared moments on stage were wonderful but the whole love making scene (You can be as loud as you want...) was so totally brilliant including some really wonderful facial expressions from bot actors. I understand that there are clear and very precise stage directions for this section which must have been entertaining in themselves for the actors – but this action requires perfect timing and a real commitment to each position change –

in my opinion they both excelled and it was a great scene to watch with a lot of resulting oohs and aahs from the audience.

Oliver Kyte / Nicky

Tom Marshall / Rod

Wonderful partnership between these two actors with some very poignant and heartfelt moments especially in “Fantasies come true” and “If you were Gay”.

Tom managed the comedy and absurdness in “My Girlfriend, who lives in Canada” extremely well – Rod is totally in denial when all around him know he is gay.

Oliver plays the streetwise Nicky who is a two-handed puppet with **Dario Biedma-Coleman** and together they really brought this character to life with expressive movement from the puppet and really good close work from the pair without stumbles or trips. Some great moments in “The money song” with Princeton

Hannah Pike / Lucy the Slut

Hannah threw herself into bringing out the character of Lucy – very slinky and raunchy – and a wonderful smoky/low vocal. The interplay between Lucy and the other puppets really enhancing the storytelling.

Stephen Penstone / Trecky Monster

On several occasions Trekkie Monster really steals the show and one of the show highlights is “The internet is for Porn”. Stephen created a magnificent vocal for his character which must have been hard to maintain and the movement created was superb – another two handed puppet – Stephen worked well with **Susie Williamson** to create the over the top and wild persona that is Trekkie.

Megan West / Christmas Eve

I loved Megan she committed to the character and her Japanese quirky ways in vocal and in look. Megan had wonderful facial expression and related well to her human and puppet co-performers especially with Kate Monster in “The more you Ruv someone”.

Matt Thompson / Brian

Brian is a totally decent bloke and the audience is immediately on his side throughout. Matt was bright, sparkly and upbeat throughout.

Siobhan White / Gary Coleman

Really good characterisation and look for the house caretaker, clearly very comfortable on stage. There was a nice connection with the puppet characters especially Nicky in “Schadenfreude”.

I would like to commend the above three actors who like everyone else in the show really played their parts well with quality vocals and accents. But above that they all put the puppet characters first and their reactions and eye contact were totally on the puppets rather than the handlers.

The ensemble of Susie, **Jenny Green** and Dario were busy throughout the show and ably backed up the main characters with puppetry and vocals – again excellent. I have already mentioned the Purpose boxes but I would also like to commend Susie and Jennie for their work as the Bad Idea Bears – they were bears with attitude for sure. All three worked tirelessly so well done.

This production had so many wonderful sides to it, but the most important thing was it had real spirit, commitment from all involved in whatever capacity and was true to the original Avenue Q

concept. While I enjoyed all the show some of the highlights were those with all the voices together. Regardless of accent and style the voices still melded nicely together and the characters, human and puppet were so well defined and expressed that you could still define them clearly. I am sure there were still a few who were shocked but I loved it and it was a joy to sit in auditorium full of happiness and real belly laughter.

I look forward to seeing more EBOS productions in the future and I wish you well as you get to know your new NODA Rep going forward. Thankyou.

Susan Boobyer-Pickles

Joint NODA Representative – London Region District 14