



Be inspired by amateur theatre

Society : EBOS
Production : CHESSE
Date : Fri 4th Nov
Venue : Wild Theatre
Report by : Terry Hunt

[Show Report](#)

Having been around for 30 years or so, Chess is still new by the standards of many, frequently staged, musicals, but it was one of the forerunners in the more politically loaded, contemporary style of Musical.

The score does contain a handful of well known songs, but it's not exactly a 'feel good' show, and not the easiest of scores to cope with, so Chess may not have the greatest appeal to anyone who enjoys a series of light-hearted, toe tapping tunes which they can whistle to themselves on the way home. Maybe the music not being to their taste was the reason for a small handful of the audience leaving before the interval? I do hope so, as it should have been nothing to do with the overall standard of EBOS's excellent production!

The shows moniker projected onto a white gauze for the pre-set offered a tantalising glimpse of **Victoria Spearing's** monochromatic, composite set, behind. Comprising of steps and various furnished levels, backed with Japanese Shoji style screens, the set certainly had a dramatic impact when the gauze went out. Of course, the use of black and white was in keeping with the theme of the chess board depicted downstage, but along with the white furniture, it was also appropriately reminiscent of what was considered the futuristic look of home furnishing in the late 70's. Dressed with **Helen Prior's** props such as the B&W telephones, chess pieces, etc, in addition to the geometric square designs floating above the stage, it was a very sharp, stylish and a well finished set. It was unfussy and enabled the show to flow well.

The centre stage screen did work well for the various TV broadcasts, but when displaying locations, quite often there were cast (or maybe crew on occasions?) moving in front, so it couldn't always be read properly.

The moving map projected onto the gauze during the opening number was a nice touch and worked well... however, other than the interval, that was the only time the gauze was used. Keeping that in mind, Chess is set in various parts of the world, each very different, and there was very little to represent any of them. I feel that was missing.

Given that EBOS could tap into the technical skills of **Duncan Bruce**, perhaps a workable option would have been to sacrifice the projections on the gauze (to keep the cost from increasing) just using a gobo for the 'Chess' moniker, if that's not what was used anyway, and lose the screen incorporated into the centre of the set. Instead, have a series of projections onto any combination of the 3 'Shoji' screens. ie Tyrolean mountains; Lanna style Thai rooftops; etc..and the TV screen?

I'm assume that due to lack of space, only front projection would have been an option, and there may be budgetary considerations, technical hurdles to overcome, and considerations for the director/cast,

however I feel it would have helped with locations, lifted some of the lighting states, and taken an already good quality set, to the next level.

Michael Brenkley's lighting design was subtle and sensitive to the various moods of the show. There were some nice touches, such as light from the TV when Anatoly was channel surfing, and the red, white and blue of 'Diplomats', and the lighting sweep into the audience at the end of Anthem was really quite dramatic!

The joy of having nothing but (black and) white on the set is that you don't have to consider the effects of negative colouring, so it was great to see the use of some gorgeous, richly coloured states and effects.

For the most part, the cast were well lit, however on several occasions singing/speaking characters descending the treads stage left and right, were in darkness. Exacerbated by the fact that some cast were also dressed in black, against the black legs, I feel this is something which really should have been addressed.

Referring back to my previous thoughts on the upstage screens; even without using them for projecting images onto, I would like to have seen more colour on them...rather like a cyc. When the lighting was concentrated on the downstage area, the screens still picked up light...but with no colour, generating a dull background, rather than darkness. When lit with orange in the Bangkok scene(s), for instance, the whole feel of the setting changed.

A minor detail, but during 'I Know Him So Well', during Florence's solo, Svetlana was left in darkness. During Svetlana's solo, Florence was backlit, which worked much better.

I was particularly pleased to not see radio mic's clearly stuck to everyone's forehead or cheek. I appreciate it's virtually unavoidable sometimes, but to me, it's like seeing the workings of the set. It ruins the illusion!

The quality of **Tom Horrox's** sound design was sharp and crisp, with a good balance in the auditorium and a lush sound from the orchestra. There were no unwanted clicks, bumps, crackles or other unplanned noises, and the vocals were mostly clear. Most of the time, the volume and balance of the chorus was spine tinglingly excellent. 'Endgame' in particular, was very powerful...although there quite a few examples where the balance of orchestra, vocals and choral harmonies were perfect, so well done for that.

Unfortunately – there was some inconsistency. During his dialogue and 'The Story Of Chess', the Arbiter was perfectly audible, but in every other song, he was far too quiet. Conversely, during 'Commie Newspapers' Freddie and Florence were so over amplified, it was slightly uncomfortable. A better balance was needed between Matt and Kelly, accounting for Kelly's more powerful voice. Thankfully, it was the only time that happened, however the orchestra were occasionally a bit quiet compared to the vocals eg, One Night In Bangkok - one of the few times when the fabulous percussionist could let rip ... was all slightly too subdued to fully represent the noise, hustle, bustle and chaos of Bangkok.

There seemed to be several sound problems connected with Freddie. A couple of late cues, a couple of times his voice was momentarily muffled, and one time he appeared to cut out...although it was unclear if Matt had stopped singing for some reason?

Overall, the quality of sound was very good. I understand the time limitations of a short tech period with which to perfectly balance a relatively complex musical. As much time as possible should be allocated to SFX to get the sound right during the tech. The cast have weeks to get their role right, SFX, LX and SM usually have little more than a few hours!

How lucky are EBOS to have the talent of **Thomas Joy** and a 16 piece orchestra! For an amateur company to have the luxury of such a full sound as can only be authentically produced by a sizeable orchestra, makes all the difference when handling a score like that of 'Chess'.

Credit to Thomas and the orchestra for producing such an authentic, rich and full sounding quality of music. There were times I felt totally enveloped by the music, which is all part of the magic of theatre, being transported to a place away from reality. A good orchestra is often taken for granted by those of us not musically gifted. Wrong notes/poor timing etc will raise eyebrows quickly enough, but when it's all as polished as this was, one can be guilty of forgetting that there's actually a team of unassuming, talented musicians working hard to make it happen. Hat's off to everyone. There were no raised eyebrows!

Thomas clearly spent time with the chorus to ensure divine harmonies throughout. Such a treat.

More vocal direction for one or two of the principles may have helped with their individual performances. Occasionally, singing along with the drama of the music seemed to win over the sentiments of the lyrics.

Bronwyn Hodgkins and **Sara Richardson** did a good job of continuing the monochromatic theme in a (mostly) 70's style. Along with hairstyles, the Russians were appropriately more sober in their style than ...well...the rest of the world, who were either traditional or fashionable. The colours of the costumes for 'Merano', when all the chorus were on stage, echoing the colours of the Italian flag, was a clever touch.

There were some nice details such as Florence's jewellery, Freddy's plaid jacket as a TV presenter, and a host of gabardine macs for the reporters. Nice to see the Bangkok 'Ladyboy' wasn't over done!

I liked the colours of the Italian flag amongst the Merano dancers/chorus, and the gold costumes for the Thai dancers...all adding some punchy colour in amongst all the black and white.

When Steven returned in the same Mayor's suit but without the chains of office, with him being so tall he was still very noticeable and it wasn't clear if he was still supposed to be the Mayor, or not. To keep the monochromatic theme for principles, to have made the Mayor's costume as a 'traditional Tyrolean' outfit, in white, would have defined his role better.

Although flared trousers may have been on their way out by the end of the 70's, in Act 2, Freddie appeared in a very smart suit which looked great on him, but was too modern to be a fashion of the time. Perhaps a safari suit inspired outfit would have been more evocative of the era?

In all, a good job, well done, and lovely to see the ENTIRE cast in costumes which fit properly.

Sophie Horrox is to be congratulated on choreographing her first full show. There was plenty of content and varying styles, from ballet, to contemporary, and a good use of Thai signature moves. In isolation, moves such as co-ordinated stag leaps were impressively executed by the dancers however, timing wavered at times. 'The Arbiter' in particular, comes to mind.

It is worth considering the ability of individual dancers when choreographing, as less dancers or a simpler, well executed routine, may be preferable to pushing some people beyond their ability and having the routine look a little untidy. Sophie is clearly able to choreograph competently, but maybe she needs to learn to 'crack the whip' a bit more at rehearsals!

Well done to **Mette Isaksen** and **Courtney Fleming** who performed with beauty and grace, however their duet felt somewhat restrained, being tethered to the 'chess board'. I understand the reason for it, but watching Mette's cabrioles being performed so effortlessly, I wished for these two talented dancers to have the freedom to use more of the stage. It wasn't wrong, I just felt it a shame. Maybe a bigger 'chessboard' would have opened up options?

Under the direction of **Margery Jackson**, EBOS presented a good calibre show, very complete in its stylization. The show flowed well, although, any sense of time passing or travel, was a bit lost. At appropriate times, it helps the audience understand that something has changed if the music, lighting and on stage action are brought down to a moment of dark, silent, stillness, signalling an end to one place/period of time, before bringing the stage to life again.

Margery made very good use of the ensemble. During numbers such as 'The History of Chess' and 'Merano' they were rightly, very much part of the proceedings, and yet at other times, they were almost invisible, their voices ethereally radiating from the darkness. It was lovely, as there can be a temptation to give the minor roles/chorus more time 'in the spotlight' than is really required.

A few picky points are that I did find the very first entrance of the ensemble looked a little like they were 'taking their places'. A steady, but purposeful approach would have looked more natural. I appreciate numbers may have otherwise been lacking, but women looked out of place during 'The Russian Machine', and there were a few random 'bus lines' evident during 'Nobody's Side', but overall, very nice chorus work.

I'm not sure the Mayor should have been included in the dancing as it somehow demeaned his status. Having the Mayor, flanked by costumed dancers, with everyone else as flag waving onlookers, would have given a better impression of an 'event' happening.

For the direction of individuals, acting spaces were very small. Couples standing close and leaning into each other, or soloists standing down stage centre, singing out. This can be perfectly ok at times, but I felt there was rather a lot of it. Freddie could have covered the stage much more when photographing; 'Someone Else's Story', is quite introspective and doesn't need to be sung directly TO the audience, so Svetlana could have moved to different points of the stage, while reflecting on her story.

'Endgame' was nicely filled with the tension and drama demanded of the music.

Rutendo Mushambi gave a good sense of control as The Arbiter. Slightly aloof and calm, firm and untouchable! Rutendo looked assured and comfortable on stage, gliding around almost phantom like, he just seemed to 'appear' in various places. Dialogue was delivered clearly and The Story Of Chess, well articulated, but unfortunately, much of the rest of Rutendo's singing was too quiet to hear the words. I'm not sure if there was problem with his mic, or it was the balance not being quite right.

Freddie isn't a nice character, and is quite a demanding role. Although it was a true performance, **Matt Thompson** didn't seem 100% comfortable with it. Bigger gestures, posturing and confident

strides, rather than small steps, would have transformed Freddy into an arrogant man, rather than a spoiled brat, which is how he came across. Maybe Matt's voice was getting tired, but he seemed to be stretching his voice just a bit too far in one or two songs during Act 1 ('Commie Newspapers' and '1956'). Matt's entire performance picked up dramatically in act 2, both vocally and in performance, starting with a good rendition of 'One Night In Bangkok', leading the choreography with confidence. Pretty **Kelly Gates** as Florence, has a stronger voice, so perhaps it would have helped during 'Commie Newspapers' and 'Press Conference', if Kelly held back on volume, so Matt didn't have to compete? In fact it may have served Kelly well to use less energy in search of volume as there was too much breath bursting out on the consonants on occasion.

Kelly performs with great expression and gave a subtle transformation of a woman falling for Anatoly. Apart from a couple of times when pushing for volume (as previously mentioned) Kelly performed well throughout her songs, which were sang with apparent ease. 'Nobody's Side' and 'Quartet' especially notable. I would like to have seen Florence a bit more physically animated, but in all, a confident, strong performance.

Daniel Strong as Anatoly. The Voice. It goes without saying that Daniel was note perfect throughout, however I MUST comment on his performance of Anthem. Not forgetting the input of the orchestra and ensemble, I was delighted that Daniel nailed Anthem as it is the 'money' song of Chess, and it was spot on. Goosebumps time, so very well done to all.

In terms of performance, Daniel looked the part of a Russian and had a consistent accent. He made good use of the stage and I could see that a good effort was made in acting out the various emotions . There was a slight awkwardness about the interaction with other characters, which actually worked for the troubled character of Anatoly much of the time, however he would sometimes put in too much effort and it looked a little over acted. That said, the determination and passion of the final game was very well played, with **Ken Gillard** as Viigand.

Undoubtedly, Daniel belongs ON the stage, not pushing scenery, but learning the nuances of acting will improve the overall performance. I look forward to seeing a lot more of him in the future.

Duncan Hamilton was a good match for Daniel, as Molokov, the cold 'second' to Anatoly's gentler character. Both had a suitably Russian look about them and good accents, so they were believably 'comrades in Chess'. Duncan's performance had the appropriate air of being emotionally detached, and even a bit dark, with all his conniving. His voice came across well, and as good as the vocals were I did feel Duncan could have given more conviction to his physical performance of 'The Soviet Machine'.

Ashleigh Wells is a confident performer and appears very at ease on the stage. The character of Walter is an annoyance really, dropping into scenes, stirring things up, and then leaving again. Ashleigh could have pushed the level of smarminess up a notch, but a solid performance.

Svetlana is the only character who truly demands any really poignant emotions in Chess, and in playing this relatively small role (sadly) **Jennie Leopold** didn't disappoint. A subtle performance, beautifully sung, Svetlana's pain and sadness was felt, remaining nicely dignified where needed.

I have a few question marks over the Mayor of Merino, but these are more points of direction rather than performance, as **Stephen Compton** did a good job of leading the proceedings in Merano, including the dancing, although some of his vocals could have been louder.

Despite all the points raised, the production standards were very good and made for a thoroughly enjoyable evening's entertainment. I very much appreciate the fact that EBOS has fairly equal production values covering the whole show, and no area was weak.

For me, choral work was the highlight, and the area which perhaps needed the most attention was SFX. When it was right, it was fabulous, but it was a shame for so much effort to go into the music (orchestra and vocals), only for the audience to not reap the full benefit at times. I'm inclined to think that, as already suggested, more time needs to be allocated to SFX to get the balance for each song, as right as is possible.

Very well done EBOS, my first visit didn't disappoint!

Terry Hunt

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