

Bringing Britain to Valdosta

From April 4-10, 2019, Valdosta State University and director Joseph Mason presented the production of “The Mystery of Edwin Drood” by Rupert Holmes in the Sawyer Theatre. Based on an unfinished novel by Charles Dickens, the musical was presented in a British music hall style and encouraged audience participation. It tells the tale of a company of British actors and their chairman who put on a performance of the unfinished novel only to invite the audience to choose the main players of the incomplete ending. This murder mystery musical explored themes of romance, revenge, and retribution.

Aaron Moore’s characterization of the chairman included a formal posture, precise gestures, and proficient familiarity with the language. He successfully convinced the audience they were watching a professional rogue who could control their emotions with the tip of his hat. Just as quickly as the chairman was introduced, John Jasper was introduced to the stage. Terrance Searcy remained perfectly poised throughout his entire performance, his voice bellowing to the back row. Even when in jest, he projected an air of solemnity. The pinnacle of this duo’s mastering of the style was put on display during the song “Both Sides of the Coin.” While reciting the tongue-twisting lyrics at a neck-breaking speed, both actors danced in sync and with just as much decorum as if they were royal delegates. Other notable actors included Daniel Lennox and Savannah Kern. Daniel presented Neville Landless as a mysterious man who did not take a step or make a gesture without intention or purpose. Every accusation and evil grin was directed purposefully at its target and were sharp enough to make the other characters flinch. Savannah Kern’s Princess Puffer flirted with the audience and won their affections with her

sarcastic personality and rich vibrato. Although her British accent was a different variation than the other principals and indicated a lower position, she convincingly stood her ground among them and even seduced the chairman himself.

Immersing a Valdosta audience into this raucous and witty British style was a creative directing method executed through the collective personalities of the ensemble characters. They made the company larger than life by expanding upon the stage picture. The mix of hearty folk dancing with gymnastics and classic ballet highlighted each ensemble members' strengths and brought entertainment to every audience member. Not only was the dancing impressive, but the score gave many of the principals an opportunity to showcase their vocal abilities. Bekah Ward flaunted her highest notes in "Moonfall" while Bazzard, portrayed by Emmanuel Jacoway, impressed the audience with the long run at the end of "Never The Luck." Although some spectators found themselves checking their watches towards the end of longer solo numbers, the action that filled the space in between moved at such an interesting pace that every viewer was on the edge of their seat. The musicians were able to adapt to whatever ending they were given and were even included in the plot by a shout out from the chairman.

The flexible set of "Drood" further implemented the inherent metatheatricality of the show. Ensemble members moved set pieces on and off in character, giving the audience an opportunity to bond and laugh with the company. The lights prompted the audience to pay attention to certain lines or gestures made by characters. The red lighting effects especially announced the arrival of foul play. The opening of Princess Puffer's opium den was the most

spectacular. Audience members ooh'd and ah'd as the stage revealed billowing smoke and Savannah Kern's figure emerged in colorful splendor from the fog. Almost every actor's costumes and styling were reminiscent of the era: Jasper's mutton chops, the hairstyles of the ensemble girls, and the top hats of the chairman. The element that failed to complete the illusion was Bekah Ward's wig, which constantly threatened to fall. The jaunty tunes and suspect melodies of the music set the tone for the audience and enhanced the already lovable characters.

Director Mason was brave in his endeavors to transport a modern, rural audience to a foreign time and place. Those unfamiliar with the music hall atmosphere, and theatre in general, were slow to adapt, but were on their feet by curtain call. The vote tallying process for the ultimate murderer, although meant to enhance metatheatricality, seemed to reduce its impact. The audience, in contrast to the rowdy, drunken bunch one may expect in a music hall, buckled under the pressures of the shrieking actors and their dizzying numbers; many stared blankly ahead or squirmed in their seats with discomfort. The "accidental" commencement of "Off to the Races" prematurely performed by the ensemble and the constant callbacks to the ballad "Moonfall" integrated a vaudeville of song within the plot. Overall, the playful atmosphere, flashy costumes, interluding solo numbers, and fluidity of characters made for a night reminiscent of a British music hall. If given the chance, readers should buy tickets for more than one night so that they are guaranteed to enjoy the variety of endings and therefore, the different stories made available by democracy.