

Once upon a (nearly) December, I was invited to Dalriada School's production of *Anastasia*. Despite having been involved in musical theatre for over 20 years, this was not a musical that I was particularly familiar with, bar one or two of the more famous numbers. By her own admission, Director Miss Cheryl Brown said this show choice was a risk, but the two standing ovations at the end of the night clearly confirmed it was a risk worth taking.

Set against the backdrop of the revolutionary Russia, *Anastasia* begins with tragedy when the Romanov family is overthrown by the Bolsheviks. Some years later, legend has it that one Romanov child survived the revolution: Anastasia. Cue Anya, a young woman with no memory of her childhood, and two conmen, Dmitry and Vlad, who hatch a plan to pass her off as the lost Princess, Anastasia.

One word sums up my experience of this evening: 'professionalism'. When I arrived at the school, I was greeted by the front of house team, made up of both pupils and staff members. I was made to feel very welcome and I was most impressed by the glossy programme available, the contents of which further confirmed what a huge team effort this production was.

The preset was a single chaise lounge centre stage with a gentle stream of haze, soft blue lighting and a projection of snow on the backdrop. This was a clear nod to the opulent lifestyle of the Romanov's, but also created a sense of loss, a theme central to the show. I was delighted with the round of applause as Musical Director Mrs Heather Montgomery entered the hall. Indeed, her band stood as she took her place; a true touch of class.

Rihanna McGraw was triumphant as the lead role of Anya/Anastasia. I have always believed that a real leading lady will bring an audience along with her on the character's journey and Rihanna's performance did just that. In fact, it was faultless. I was delighted to see proper technique in her delivery. All too often, young performers seem to think that good is loud and belting all the time. Now, don't get me wrong, Rihanna can raise the roof when she wants, but her performance had light and shade, it had softness and humour, and it had poise and intention. This young lady will go far, no doubt.

Lead male Dmitry was played by Dan McLean. His performance of '*My Petersburg*' was masterful, particularly as it is a song which requires vocal gymnastics with not many opportunities to breathe! Dan has a superb tenor voice with a tone and strength that I have not often heard in a young man of his age. To my surprise, this was Dan's debut performance in a musical. I do hope this is the start of a life-long love of the stage, as that voice is far too good not to be heard!

Xander de Cock took on the comedic role of Vlad Popov and a very enjoyable performance it was, too. His performance achieved just the right balance between loveable rogue and pompous nitwit! His strong vocal skills also shone through and his scenes with Countess Lily were certainly a highlight, offering comic relief and some lovely elements of slapstick.

The imposing Dowager Empress was played with mastery by Farah McBride-Hajji. What talent this young lady has! Farah's vocal range was most impressive, particularly when projecting the very lowest notes, demonstrating a beautiful richness to her tone. Hers was a performance which commanded the room. Her physicality communicated both a regal Empress, and a broken woman. Hers is another name that I suspect we will see in lights one day.

The villain of the piece, Gleb, was played by Harry Ramage. Harry successfully showed a number of sides to this character, which shows maturity in his character choices, rather than merely trying to be evil. Indeed, Harry was able to portray angst and the weight of responsibility on Gleb

to finish what his father started, whether he wants to or not. '*The Neva Flows*' was not a song I had ever heard before, but it is the one I was humming all the way home, as it was sung so beautifully.

Lucy Parkhill's performance as Countess Lily was just joyful to behold, and what a voice! Lucy looked absolutely stunning during '*Land of Yesterday*' and she managed to sustain an impressive vocal performance, despite being lifted and carried around the stage by members of the ensemble. During the scenes with Vlad, she showed herself to be a skilled comedienne leaving the audience in no doubt as to who is the boss of that relationship!

Tsar Nicholas was played by Adam Fisher in his debut performance, having previously been a member of the stage team. Whilst looking impressive in his ceremonial uniform, Adam chose a softer, paternal side to the character. A doting father, who places himself between the Bolsheviks and his family. This was the right choice to make, as it heightened the tragedy, and his gentle dancing with the daughters was emotional to watch.

Iona Park not only took on the role of the Tsarina, but I also believe she was involved in the marketing of the musical through social media. I thought Iona's strong portrayal of the mother balanced well with the Tsar, suggesting the real power behind the family may lie with her. This was a confident performance in Iona's first named role.

The Romanov children were played by Gabi Brzuchalska, Ella Mack, Lara Gordon, Theo Smyth and Meeka Austin. They performed very well as a family unit and for me, their role in the finale depicting the final moments of the Romanovs was the most powerful sequence of the evening.

Angus Gregg and Georgia Sutherland took on the roles of Count and Countess Ipolitov. Theirs was a moving scene, and they both sang beautifully, capturing the true human cost of war.

A musical is only as good as its ensemble, and this ensemble was excellent. They multi-rolled as dancers, servants, government workers, reporters, passengers, Parisians, and Russians. I can't imagine how frantic all the costume changes backstage must have been! Dances were performed with precision and energy, and I particularly enjoyed how the ensemble danced up through the audience, creating an immersive experience. Harmonies were clear and strong and it was fantastic to see all year groups represented, ensuring that the future of theatre in Dalriada is in safe hands.

Now... can I take a moment to write about the stage team?! Never have I seen such slick changes outside of a Formula 1 pit stop! This team knew exactly what they were doing, which meant the pace of the show never dipped. There were some large pieces of set and limited wing space, so congratulations to the team, Mrs McIlhatton and Mrs Williamson. In addition, Mrs Kane, Mrs Convery and their team must be congratulated for effective use of props. The little music box, suitcases, books, glasses and telephone were all period appropriate, adding to the authenticity of the production values.

When it comes to costume, *Anastasia* is a brave choice, as there is so much which you just can't get from Shein, and if you do... a lot of time and effort is needed to customise it! The Romanov family looked stunning, as did the military officials and soldiers. I loved Vlad's red velvet suit and Anastasia looked stunning in her royal dress and diamonds. I've mentioned it before, but I will mention again-those quick changes! How Dmitry left stage in pyjamas, only to come straight back on dressed for the Royal Ballet was impressive! Well done, indeed, costume team, Mrs Steele, Mrs McCandless and Mrs Wilkinson.

This was also a challenging show for the hair and makeup department. Performers who needed to be aged were done so subtly and sympathetically, so as not to create caricatures. A lot of 'up dos' are required for this show, and these were achieved with skill-little Anastasia's hair was particularly beautiful, I thought. If you will indulge me for a moment, my mother (who is a Dalriad and now in her 70s-sorry mum!) still talks about how much fun she and her friends had doing the make up for school shows. I believe it was B. F Skinner who said, 'Education is what survives when what has been learned has been forgotten.' Thank you to Mrs Bradley for continuing with this important work.

The lighting, projections, sound and special effects were worthy of a West End show. Lighting was used atmospherically, and the timing of the photograph flashes was particularly accomplished. I loved the use of red lighting to create tension and, no doubt, reflect the bloodshed. Well done to Mr McQuillan, Mr McMaster and team.

From performing in a large cast myself every year, I know how absolutely fiendish it can be to manage all of those microphones. When you attend an amateur production, you normally expect to giggle at a microphone left on backstage and hearing some of the gossip! There was none of that here, fortunately. Performers exercised 'mic etiquette' coming on and off stage, and sound levels were balanced well, which is always challenging when there is no orchestra pit. A fantastic job by Mr McIlmoyle, Mr Gamble and their team.

The decision to use projections really made this show. And by projections, I don't mean a simple PowerPoint presentation. Oh, no! These were moving visuals, timed perfectly with the music and scene changes. From performing in musicals with projections myself, I know this is not just a case of hitting the 'Go' button. No doubt countless hours went into timing these with the cast and maybe this is an excellent opportunity to mention the train scene!

Kieran O'Brien and Liam Irwin constructed a train carriage which not only fitted on stage and off stage, but it moved, rotated 360 degrees and held a chorus of passengers and principals. This scene, to watch, looked so slick that one could be forgiven for thinking that it was simple to perform. Without having been at rehearsals, I can still say with 100% certainty that this scene was a huge team effort, and I would imagine a few tears may have been shed bringing it together. It was a triumph from all departments.

And now, for the real leading ladies. Over the last 20 years, I have had the pleasure to stage manage, choreograph, and direct full scale school musicals myself, so I know first-hand how much time, effort, and dedication this show will have taken from Miss Cheryl Brown and Mrs Heather Montgomery. In a time when there is a huge amount of pressure around the expectations on teachers, one cannot stress enough the hours and hours a production of this size and success will have taken from these two professionals.

As one has come to expect from Mrs Montgomery, the music was just next level. As well as leading the band, you could see Mrs Montgomery always there, ready to support the singers on stage, keeping everything moving along at pace. I was delighted to see a number of pupils in the band, as well as some seasoned professionals. The cast sang using solid harmonies, filling the room, and the Principals had clearly been schooled in the use of dynamics, breath work and projection. A musical director always has a difficult job when the audience arrive not knowing the music, but the quality of the performance meant that this didn't matter. I loved when the pace picked up with '*My Petersburg*' and '*Land of Yesterday*', but I have to admit, I loved '*Stay, I Pray You*' even more: a tragic moment captured beautifully through music.

Director and Choreographer, Miss Cheryl Brown, was beaming with pride at the end of the performance, and quite right too! Miss Brown had created a stunning piece of theatre which included so many young people and so many stand out performances. The principal cast had been supported well to find their characters, and effective use of blocking throughout meant that no one was out of sight-so important when you are a parent looking for your child on stage! The way that the Romanov dancing was then depicted later through the projections was very clever, further creating the feeling of nostalgia and loss. The ballet was just wonderful. Miss Brown had worked with the dancers to showcase their skills, and I thought the dynamic movement of Von Rothbart was particularly impactful.

When individuals are congratulated, there is always the risk that someone is forgotten, and if this is the case, I must apologise. *Anastasia* was a phenomenal team effort, and I hope that everyone involved in any way understands that. This was a very, very special show and, in a world where we can be far too quick to criticise our young people, this production gave a hundred reasons to celebrate them. I still remember the first production I was in when I was three; a goat ate my dress, but that is a whole other story! I know that all of those incredible young people will remember *Anastasia* forever, and I am in no doubt that, '*In a Crowd of Thousands*', Dalriada continues to stand out as truly exceptional. Bravo!