



Adelaide Theatre Guide

www.theatreguide.com.au

Supporting live theatre in South Australia

PO Box 738
MODBURY SA 5092

info@theatreguide.com.au
ABN : 93 297 960 525

CHESS - THE MUSICAL

Storeyboard Entertainment

Her Majesty's Theatre

Until 29 May

Review by John Wells

This staged concert version of "Chess" hovers between the awful and the wonderful.

The almost insurmountable problem with "Chess" is the ridiculously convoluted story. The book (by Tim Rice, flying solo from Andrew Lloyd Webber) takes its cues from the 1972 World Chess Championship between the taciturn Russian Boris Spassky and the younger, brasher and intense American Bobby Fischer. The plot is confused and bafflingly multi-layered, with little character development and strange narrative leaps. There is the surly, excitable Yank versus the dignified Russian; a fog of Cold War intrigue; CIA and KGB subterfuge; love affairs; political defections; spurned ex-wives; a lost father; and relentless over-emotional dramatic carry on. And some chess here and there.

This pared-down concert version tries to simplify things by putting the music at the centre of the production. And the music is sublime – poppy, synth-and-guitar-heavy with the brilliant melodic hooks of late-career Abba (by Benny Andersson and Bjorn Ulvaeus) – but sublime nonetheless. Well known mid-1980s hits like "One Night in Bangkok" and "I Know Him So Well" give way to many beautifully crafted songs ("Nobody's Side", "Anthem", "Heaven Help My Heart") alongside brilliant clever little tunes. The score is inventive and catchy and fun. Musical Director David Piper leads a cohesive and impeccably-drilled orchestra; the sound and '80s mood is excellent.

But the concert style production is only partially successful. The action takes place on a small raked chessboard square, filled with the main characters and a tight group of all-singin'-all-dancin' support players. The minimal set with the odd indicative prop is confusing, and the place of each scene is frequently unclear. Too often we simply don't know what on earth is going on.

The muddled feel of the production is not helped by poor direction and uneven casting. The score is demanding and needs versatile singers with great voices to give full effect to its rich variations. Some of the performers' voices are not up to the demands of their roles. Mark Furze (the American chess champ, Frederick Trumper), has a powerful rock voice but with a dismally narrow range: he is always straining to get even close to the high notes. Natalie Bassingthwaite (Florence, the lover of both chess players) also has a narrow vocal range, and pushes her voice uncomfortably close to its limits. The principals' voices don't blend well together and the effect is often jarring. Sometimes the performers don't seem to understand what they are singing about: the performances don't gel with the lyrics and emotional intent of the song. There is a lot of prancing and prowling about on the stage when stillness and engagement with the song (and the audience) would be transformative. The ensemble's choreography is distracting and looks like an over-ambitious high school musical.

But when the show works, it works really well. There are some powerful performances which lift the production. Alexander Lewis (Sergievsky, the Russian) brings a lovely warm tenor voice and a calm gravitas; the under-used Paulini (Svetlana, the Russian's wife) shows how to command the stage in both her solo "Someone Else's Story" and "I Know Him So Well", her duet with Bassingthwaite. She is sensational. Eddie Muliaumaseali's deep, rich bass and impeccable diction is impressive, and Rob Mills injects charm and energy in a small recurring role. Bassingthwaite overcomes her vocal constraints to



Adelaide Theatre Guide

www.theatreguide.com.au

Supporting live theatre in South Australia

PO Box 738
MODBURY SA 5092

info@theatreguide.com.au
ABN : 93 297 960 525

give an emotionally expressive performance; she is a strong and tense Florence. Her best moment is in the ruefully reflective "Heaven Help My Heart".