

'I am big. It's the pictures that got small'. Norma Desmond's famous line encapsulates all that is Sunset Boulevard, pure opulence from the scrumptious score to the dramatic and flamboyant performance. Based on the 1950's film by Bill Wilder starring silent movie queen Gloria Swanson, the stage version; after many attempted and aborted musical adaptations; finally had its debut in 1992 with the book and lyrics by Don Black and Christopher Hampton and the music by Andrew Lloyd Webber.

Sunset Boulevard powerfully charts the decline of the silent movies and instead of celebrating the rise of the talkies such as the musical Singing in the Rain, it hovers moodily over the demise of the stars who were cast aside and 'dethroned'. Told through the eyes of the struggling writer Joe Gillis as he is drawn into the flamboyant yet hollow world of former silent movie star Norma Desmond and her butler Max, who holds her aloft. Desmond determined to make a comeback hires Gillis to rewrite the script 'Salome' she has penned and demands he stays at her mansion until it is complete. With one eye on the present through his co-writer Betty and two feet firmly planted in the past at the mansion – Joe is drawn into the delusions of the aged star as she becomes attached to him, he watches her erratic behaviour escalate as her grip on reality diminishes. Joe is torn between love for Betty in the present and the protection and wealth of Norma in the past. Only tragedy can come from the situation.

The score transports you back to a by gone era that is instantly recognised with its swelling melodies and recitative qualities and this production by Croft House Theatre Company exploit these to the full. The 20-piece orchestra under the exceptional musical direction of Matthew Symonds sound glorious, they are rich, full and soaring with the haunting quality that remains with you long after the curtain falls. The Set is dominated by the grand staircase at Norma's mansion, with a mixture of trucked interiors and flying windows. Particularly effective are the broken remnants of set that are flown in as a reminder of the show's theme. The use of old footage is used to simulate a car chase and this all adds to the tone and mood. To the delight of the audience Desmond's car does make a physical entrance on stage as she goes back to the Paramount studios to meet Cecil B DeMille.

Claire Harriott's direction of the show flows and has some beautiful moments and I really must applaud the casting of this production – perfect. James Smith makes a very believable Jo Gillis with just the right amount of sincerity and youthful anger. His rendition of Sunset Boulevard at the opening of Act two was one of the strongest versions I have heard of it, giving every lyric meaning and relevance, it was very thought provoking. His Too Much in Love to Care duet with Catherine Harban as Betty Schaefer was beautifully tender both vocally and in the sincerity of the acting from both performers. Harban is a definite star of the future.

The Ensemble worked hard as the music is very challenging and they did a great job, I must mention Matthew Walker as Artie Green whose voice soared in every number, his performance skill makes it difficult to look away from him!

Standout Richard Carlin is absolutely wonderful as Max, his demeanour and carriage ooze dignity and then he sings.... Glorious! He could grace and conquer the West End stage with this performance. As should be, the star of Sunset Boulevard is Norma Desmond herself performed by Mary Kingsnorth on her return to the stage. What a 'return' not a comeback darling. On opening night, Kingsnorth overcame the nerves and costume issues quickly and bloomed in the role. Her rendition of – As if we never said Goodbye – was utterly heart wrenching...such emotion. Why this lady as had a break from the boards I do not know but I do hope she is now firmly back where she belongs, in front of an audience! Her mental demise was accumulative and raw and her 'close ups to camera' defined her never surrender attitude. A powerhouse performance that took me, as should, on a woefully empathic journey.

Croft House theatre Company I stood as the curtain fell, rare for me, but fully deserved. I thoroughly travelled your journey. Sunset Boulevard is at the Sheffield Lyceum until March 23<sup>rd</sup> 2024. Do not miss this... a mesmerising story, an outstanding orchestra and powerhouse performances that are as classy as the era its set in.

**North West End UK Rating:** ★ ★ ★ ★ ★