

## Review by Claire Taranaski.

I could easily make my review three words long “elegant musical perfection” and happily end it there, but if you have clicked through to read a review you want more than that. As a regular musical theatre attender I hate it when the first thing Sheffield Theatres have to put on the booking page for a company like Croft House is “an amateur production” as this puts off fans who miss out on one if not the most perfect evening of musical theatre I have seen at the Lyceum, with nothing about it that would be out of place on a West End stage and would make Andrew Lloyd Webber supremely happy.

For those of you who do not know the musical, it tells the story of what happens when struggling movie writer Joe Gillis (James Smith) accidentally finds himself in the home now aging and recluse former silent movie star Norma Desmond (Mary Kingsnorth) and their relationship and Norma’s attempts to return to fame and the silver screen. However I discovered it’s much more than that, it’s a moving look at mental health before mental health was at the forefront of people’s minds. It’s a terrifying look at obsession, not just directed from Norma to Joe, but from her loyal companion Max to her and also with people in general trying to become famous. It is also an elegant look at Hollywood in the late 1940s / early 1950s, that seems to follow on naturally from the history lesson provided by “Singin in the Rain”.

As mentioned everything about this production was perfect (apart from Mary’s hair piece falling out at one point but her immediate reaction was so perfect it was instantly forgiven and shows her talent as an actress) and this could be seen immediately in the opening number “Let’s Have Lunch”, where the harmonies and stage presence from all of the cast and ensemble were superb from the first note (you knew you were immediately in for an excellent evening), the styling or the wardrobe, make up and hair capturing the era perfectly and the number immediately put a big smile on my face. It also showed off the talents of director and choreographer Claire Harriott and musical director Matthew Symonds who could not have made better use of the cast and ensemble and meant the audience were immediately drawn in and kept drawn into the show throughout.

The quality of the entire ensemble could also be seen in the musical numbers “The Lady’s Paying” and “A Little Suffering”, which as the show went on and we were drawn into the delusion and obsession of the story offered some unexpectedly delightful comedic relief and in the new year eve numbers “This Time Next Year” and “The Perfect Year” at the end of act 1, which wonderfully captured on stage the contrast between the parties of the gleeful young movie wannabes and the elegant but tragic Norma. At this point I must also praise the set and prop teams for capturing the contrast between Norma’s aging elegant mansion and the film studio lot.

But what about the stars of the show, he may be second in the credits but James as Joe Gillis proved himself as a musical theatre star, with incredible stage presence and attitude from his opening prologue and although we may not have always been on his side his charm, personality and incredible talent kept us always drawn in. He also had natural chemistry with all of his co-stars whether it was Mary, Richard Carlin as Max and Catherine Harban as Betty Schafer (whose second act duet “Too Much To Care” must be one of the best love songs in musical theatre, was beautifully performed with the sweet chemistry of love and made the finale even more tragic for the two of them) or with Matthew Walker as his friend Artie Green.

Mary’s portrayal of Norma gave me actual goosepimples in her numbers “With One Look” and “As if We Never Said Goodbye” (confirming the power of Andrew Lloyd Webber’s music and Don Black’s lyrics and truly giving Elaine Paige a run for her money in the role). As an audience we became obsessed with Mary’s Norma, not being able to take our eyes off her and feeling her pain in a performance that given by someone else might have turned into a stereotype but with Mary led to us understanding and sympathising with her.

The other of my three most incredible performances of the night that will stay with me for a long time is Richard Carlin as Norma’s loyal companion Max who was up there with the likes of Rex Harrison, gave us an unexpected angle on obsession and delusion and whose incredible singing voice, stage presence and passion shone through in the likes of “The Greatest Star Of All”. I cannot wait to see what all three of these performers do next.

I’m going to end this review how I began and urge all musical theatre fans in South Yorkshire not to miss out on this evening of elegant musical perfection.

