

CHIPPERFIELD THEATRE GROUP

NELL'S BELLES

With 35 speaking parts and nearly as many songs, Chipperfield Theatre Group attempted to raise the bar with their latest production, Nell's Belles. And, despite an unpromising beginning, they not only succeeded, but triumphed in clearing it with something to spare. Initially, with so many characters and historical reference points, the threads of the production seemed too disparate and a coherent plot was difficult to determine. As the first half unfurled however, these faults were overcome as the central figures in the story began to take centre stage.

Rob Hine's performance as womanising King Charles II was tremendous and the show benefited hugely from his entrance. With a glint in his eye and a hint of Terry Thomas in his parlance, he charmed both the cast and audience alike. The chemistry between Charles and his various conquests, most notably Nell Gwynne (Wendy East) brought the production to life. So getting the casting right was always going to play a huge part in the success of the show.

Clearly, director Tricia Richardson didn't want to take any chances so all the box office Galacticos were thrown together in the dance troupe Nell's Belles whose bawdy banter and raucous songs were the backbone of the show. It was Desperate Housewives meets The Pussycat Dolls - in period costume. Classic.

Against the backdrop of the plague and the great fire of London this musical tale of seventeenth century debauchery was played out. Scene by scene, the jokes got funnier and songs got saucier. An example of which, "Naked on the beach", was hugely entertaining - I took a keen interest in noting there was not a towel out of place.

This was feel-good theatre at its best. Colourful, jolly and gay. Which brings me, belatedly, to Paul Instrall. His portrayal of Charles' brother James, which I can only describe as a hybrid of Dick Emery and Nikki from Big Brother, was the cherry on a cake which was already covered in copious layers of icing.

Here's hoping Chipperfield Theatre Group cook us up another treat very soon.

Jason Cox