

Magic of an era

'SWEET CHARITY', performed by Newbury Nomads, at The Corn Exchange, from Thursday, October 4 to Saturday, October 6

Sweet Charity, the story of a dancehall hostess on a futile quest to find love among the ritual heartbreakers of New York, is one of the great musicals of the '60s, with some unforgettable songs and a storyline with universal appeal.

Newbury Nomads, in their recent production, captured the atmosphere of the time with ease - with Jeanette Maskell's experienced hand at choreography, Judith Baileys flamboyant costumes, and more beehive wigs than I've ever seen before in one place, all helping to recreate the magic of the era. The set may have been a little minimalist, but the setting was unmistakably '60s.

Charity Hope Valentine is a terrific role - but it's not one for the faint-hearted. On stage virtually the whole time, she drives the pace of the performance. Thankfully the Nomads found a leading lady who could really do the part justice. Emma Newman leapt from one scene to the next with impressive energy, capturing the character's naive hopefulness perfectly, and displaying great versatility as a singer and dancer. She would have been at home on the professional stage.

Emma's confidantes at the splendidly downbeat Fan-Dango Ballroom, Helene (Sonya Bull) and Nickie (Delia Canning), provided a fine contrast to the dreamy Charity, Sonya bringing well-measured cynicism to her role, and Delia boosting the ballroom scenes with her strong voice and beaming smile.

As for Charity's unlucky lovers, David Slade brought style and humour to the role of spineless film idol Vittoiro Vidal, and Daniel Maskell was exquisitely self-deprecating as Oscar Lindquist.

The chorus enthusiastically assumed a range of diverse roles, from bypassers in the park to stoned revellers, although they took a little while to get going (and the orchestra too sounded slightly discordant in the early scenes). However, the tricky 'Rich Man's Fugue' was very effective, and chorus and instrumentalists were well in tune and raring to go in the big numbers of the second act: 'Rhythm of Life', (with Tony Randall clearly enjoying the role of Daddy Brubeck, and Dennis Heath's kaftan and wig stealing the scene); and 'I Love To Cry At Weddings' finely led by Russell Barrett as Herman.

A great evening out, and a credit to director Stuart Honey and producer Amanda Maskell Above all, the cast seemed to be enjoying it too.

MARK LILLYCROP