

Road to success

Bittersweet challenge of Sunset Boulevard for Nomads

Newbury Nomads: Sunset Boulevard, at the Corn Exchange, from Wednesday, October 7 to Saturday, October 10

Andrew Lloyd Webber's adaptation of Billy Wilder's classic black and white film is far from having the sugar-sweet happy-ending format of many musicals. Not only does the tragic story of Norma Desmond, a silent movie star who refuses to accept that her career is over, demand endless scene changes (neatly achieved) and special effects (impressive), but actor/singers in the two main roles who can bring out to the full its bittersweet emotions. Nomads took on this enormous challenge and met it successfully.

Scriptwriter Joe Gillis (Jon Lovell) is broke. When by accident he is called to Norma's opulent house on Sunset Boulevard, he is seduced both by money and the woman herself to complete a script which will re-launch the ex-star's career.

Meanwhile he agrees to write a screenplay with Betty Schaefer (excellently portrayed by Sasha Robaczynski). They fall in love, but when the insanely possessive Norma finds out, she threatens suicide. Joe finally steels himself to leave, a decision which ends in tragedy and is followed by the final scene in which the deluded Norma commands the stage, convinced she is still a star.

Jon Lovell was superb as Joe, and had the ability to bring his character to life so cleverly you weren't sure whether to pity or despise him. Particularly memorable was his brilliant, embittered singing of Sunset Boulevard, a harsh indictment of his life there.

From the first note of With One Look it was clear that Grace Ryder was going to give an outstanding performance as Norma. In gorgeous costumes, she gave a glittering, faultless portrayal of the fragile woman protected from reality by her ex-husband Max (superbly played and sung by Paul Hyde).

Many smaller parts required – and received – excellence both in singing and acting, while the chorus were animated and slickly professional with their moves. This is not a show packed with laughs, so it was good to be able to smile at two well-executed lighthearted chorus numbers, The Lady's Paying and A Little Suffering. Microphone problems beleaguered the opening scenes on Thursday, but throughout, musical director Nic Cope's orchestra played the dramatic score movingly and with sensitivity. Director Stuart Honey and his team deserve congratulations for this poignant, memorable production.

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