

British Theatre Guide

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Blonde Bombshells of 1943

Alan Plater
Hampstead Theatre
(2006)

This two-and-a-half-hour musical play divides its time roughly equally between uninspiring drama and high quality musical production.

As the title suggests, it is set in wartime England and follows the fortunes of an all-female band that specialises in swinging jazz and big band music.

The first surprise is that with the possible exception of the youngest, not one of eight bombshells is all that blonde. They rely on garish wigs of the type favoured by Harpo Marx for their bleached attraction.

At the start, narrator Liz (Karen Paullada) looks back on a single day that her then schoolgirl grandmother, played by the same actress, enjoyed, during which she apparently learned about "love, sex, betrayal and death". This is a great by-line but disappointingly, with the exception of the third leg, does not really describe what follows.

One the day in question, the band is to appear in a live concert, also broadcast by the BBC, at a far from glamorous northern seaside town that dare not breathe its name - Hull.

The problem, as the play opens at midday, is that the band has been bombed out and mysteriously lost four of its eight members. Initially we therefore see a clichéd quartet of incomers, the aforementioned unbelievably innocent schoolgirl, a nun with a great George Formby repertoire, an unbelievably posh tart and, all too predictably, a cowardly bloke (wittily played by Chris Grahamson), all demonstrating wonderful musical skills.

As these scenes progress, incredible numbers of very old jokes are fired off and director Mark Babych from the Octagon in Bolto, which is co-producing the play, allowed far too many of them to disappear without trace - or even a snigger from any member of the full house on opening-night.

Remarkably, considering that four of this octet had been in the band for only a few hours, their concert, which takes up most of the second half of the evening, is a remarkable success in which all play and sing together perfectly, even those who did not know the words or tunes a short lorry ride before.

The premise of this play, reputedly inspired by Ivy Benson and her band, is remarkably similar to that of Imogen Stubbs' critically unsuccessful portrait of wartime actors, *This Happy Few*. Sadly, it makes similar mistakes with anachronisms, limp dialogue and no real plot.

The cast have clearly been chosen for their musical versatility rather than acting skills but there is some good character acting, particularly from Claire Storey as the nun who eventually dons a

bright red dress and the kind of matching stilettos that Germaine Greer characterised - albeit rather less politely - as a sexual invitation.

Regardless of its dramatic shortcomings, *Blonde Bombshells of 1943* could still sell well as there is a great deal of nostalgia for the war years and the music, for those with a taste for this style, really is so well performed and so catchy that it eventually developed into a sing-along for many delighted audience members.

David Chadderton [reviewed](#) this production at the Octagon, Bolton

Reviewer: [Philip Fisher](#)