

British Theatre Guide

News, reviews, features and podcast on theatre across the UK

Chess the Musical

Music by Abbas Benny Andersson and Björn Ulvaeus, book and lyrics by Tim Rice
New Victoria Theatre, Woking, and touring
(2011)

Director Craig Revel Horwood has worked extensively with the tiny Watermill Theatre in Newbury and taken on board John Boyles method of using actor/musicians to people his shows. In Revel Horwoods case they have to dance too. This poses many problems for him as choreographer and for designer Christopher Woods, which they seem to have overcome quite brilliantly and to stunningly dramatic effect, so it isnt long before the musical instruments cease to be appendages and become seamlessly part of the production. Scene changes, and there are many, are effected mainly by Ben Cracknells lighting effects and video projections on the backing screen.

The cast totals thirty and only one doesnt play an instrument, a vast and complicated undertaking in size alone, and to complicate things even further there are three themes throughout the show - animosity and suspicion between the Soviet Union and the West during the Cold War, the game itself between American Freddie Trumper and the Russian challenger Anatoly Sergievsky, and the love affair which develops between Trumpers Hungarian-born girl-friend and the Russian.

There is even a fourth challenger for supremacy - the songs! First released as a concept album in 1984, two numbers emerged as huge chart toppers - I Know Him So Well and One Night in Bangkok, the latter set in a raunchy and exotic night club scene seemingly for the sole reason of including it, and, in a little camp humour, there is a tourist complete with camera watching from the shadows.

Apart from those two songs, the score is (to me) largely unmemorable and sometimes strident, with the exception of Pity The Child, striking a chord with the audience and sung with pathos by James Fox as the brash and swaggering Freddie accompanying himself on guitar. Also impressive is the strong and pure baritone of Daniel Koek in Anatolys Anthem so powerfully and heartrendingly sung that it is a memory I shall treasure.

The dancers are the chess pieces and they battle it out as the two contestants compete, the pawns being particularly appealing with some quirky and fun choreography and singing, although I am still wondering why two of the men had Queen written across their chests, an in-jokeperhaps.

Horwood has wisely tried to keep the main emphasis on the love triangle and human emotions, but the drama of the background story is too strong to smother and, with the complex interweaving of relationships, defection and political intrigue, Tim Rices clever and relevant lyrics need to be clear which was not always the case against the soaring volume of the music.

Performances throughout though are top quality. Together with Koek and Fox, Shona Whites affection-switching Florence and Poppy Tierney as Russian wife Svetlana excel, with James Graeme and Steve Varnon bringing in the political intrigue.

The game is greater than its players, intones David Erik as the bare-chested Arbiter, but in this show - which game?

Touring to Torquay, Dublin, High Wycombe, Glasgow and Trieste

Peter Lathan [reviewed](#) this production when it opened in Newcastle

Reviewer: [Sheila Connor](#)