

British Theatre Guide

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The Glee Club

Richard Cameron
New Vic, Newcastle-under-Lyme
(2007)

Theatre-goers in north Staffordshire must have been looking forward to 2007 with a certain amount of apprehension.

Gwenda Hughes had stepped down as artistic director of the New Vic after building up a very strong following - only the second person to hold that job in the theatre's 21-year existence. On top of that, the theatre had celebrated its best Christmas ever, with *Oliver!* pulling in record crowds.

Her successor Theresa Heskins has a lot to live up to. But if her first offering is anything to go by, the New Vic is in good hands.

There must have been a few quizzical looks when it was announced that her first production would be Richard Cameron's *The Glee Club*. But in many ways it's a "safe" choice.

It's a play set in 1962 about Yorkshire miners who are in a harmony group and sing classic songs. It's bound to go down well in Staffordshire, a former mining community with a large number of elderly and middle-aged music fans.

Ms Heskins must have had a difficult job finding six guys who can both act and sing. But she's made a pretty good choice.

The cast have credits in major musicals including *Les Misérables*, *Oliver!* and *The Phantom of the Opera* in the West End as well as national tours of *Blood Brothers* and *Chess*. They have plenty of opportunities to showcase their vocal talents - and their acting ability shines brighter than a miner's safety lamp.

The Glee Club is the story of half a dozen miners who work hard and drink hard. Being together down the pit leads to their having a special bond with one another and they tell their mates their inner fears and secrets which they probably can't reveal to members of their families.

From the moment *The Glee Club* starts, with six actors crowded around a piano singing *Side By Side*, you know you're in for a memorable evening.

Cameron's script has more pace than the manrider trains which used to take miners to the coal face.

The Glee Club recalls the days of Dansette record players; Horace Batchelor from Keynsham and his infra-draw method advertised on Radio Luxembourg; and Bert Weedon's *Play In A Day* guitar book. You could almost hear the audience yearning for a return to those days of supposed innocence and fun.

Ms Heskins sensitively directs *The Glee Club* which contains a mixture of frivolity when the miners are singing together as well as tension and pathos when the characters invariably clash.

Alistair Parker is superb as Bant, the big, blustering hard man who quickly loses his temper and thinks he can sort everything out by using his fists.

Matthew White is equally impressive as Phil the church organist whose outing as a homosexual had a much more outrageous consequence then than it would today.

Gerard Bantall catches the eye as Colin whose ambition to be a rock 'n' roll star is tested to the limit when his girlfriend becomes pregnant.

There are also solid performances from John Biggins as Scobie, the put-upon husband and father in a house full of females; Tim Frances as level-headed Jack who gives sound advice which his colleagues don't always appreciate; and Simeon Truby as Walt whose family has fallen apart after his wife's death.

The singing is as good as the acting, although occasionally a couple of the voices don't have the power to carry a number and are drowned out by the backing harmonies.

But there's so much to admire in this production, from the realistic accents to the realism of life both underground and on the surface. It really will fill you with glee.

"The Glee Club " runs until February 17th

Reviewer: [Steve Orme](#)