

British Theatre Guide

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

Ain't Misbehavin'

Murray Horwitz and Richard Maltby Jnr

A Sheffield Theatres production

Crucible, Sheffield

(2004)

In front of an audience reasonably described as older rather than younger, though I did see a crowd of about twenty teenagers with one actively discussing the bass player's technique, Fats Waller was reincarnated in Sheffield in a big way. The programme notes reported he had been at the now non-existent Sheffield Empire Theatre and wandering in one of its many parks had heard a lively strain from the birds which inspired him to return to his hotel and finish off *Honey Hush*.

The pianist, not looking anything like the famous Fats, but leading a band full of the fire and fervour expected of him, wandered on the stage, sat down and began to play. He was joined by the remaining players, and by the troupe of five singers who sang, danced - the Lindy Hop - and acrobatted around the thrust stage, playing to every individual member of the audience and addressing a lucky few personally. The evening gradually built up to a moderate climax at the end of the first half and to a breathtaking, overwhelming finale lasting for hours. (To my surprise, only two hours had elapsed, but the quantity and quality explained the magic of Thomas Waller - that was his name.)

The staging was excellent, resembling a Harlem honky-tonk of the 1920s - they tell me - with closely woven interaction between the band, including excellent solo pieces, particularly on the trumpet and the drums, and the five singers, rapidly changing the mood with their costumes, matching the songs they were performing. A small section may have caused some of the audience a reminder of the Yanks - over here, over paid, oversexed - with singers in Army uniform and the Stars and Stripes projected on the stage floor.

More than thirty numbers, not all written by Fats, but associated with his playing, were presented most excellently, including of course *Ain't Misbehavin'*, *Honeysuckle Rose*, *Truckin'* and a brief reference to the drug scene, *The Viper's Drag* and *The Reefer Song*.

A reprise of *Honeysuckle Rose* ended a wonderful evening, with the pianist picking up his hat and wandering back off the stage, while the audience, faces lit up and wonderfully elated, were greeted by the Theatre Staff smiling and saying, "Wasn't it wonderful. Didn't you enjoy it?"

The answer was obviously in the affirmative.

"Ain't Misbehavin'" plays until 22nd January

Reviewer: [Philip Seager](#)