

British Theatre Guide

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Up On the Roof

Simon Moore and Jane Prowse
Coliseum Theatre, Oldham
(2010)

Oldham Coliseum has teamed up with New Wolsey Theatre in Ipswich for this story of a university *capella* singing group and what happens to them over ten years after they leave university.

This three-act play (with two intervals) begins in 1975 as the five members of the group Tim, Keith, Angela, Bryony and leader Scott escape a leaving party to their secret meeting place on the roof of their student digs in Hull. They sing *a capella* versions of Motown and soul classics, drink, talk about their ambitions for the future and accept Tim's invitation to all meet in ten years' time at his parents' villa in France. Act two is five years later when they reunite to sing at Bryony's wedding, but is the neurotic bride marrying her university love Scott or has something changed in the intervening years? The final act is in 1985 when they keep their appointment in France and show one another what they have become, comparing the reality with their dreams of ten years earlier.

The script is very variable in its quality and the effectiveness of its humour. The first act has a lot of obvious gags and old jokes and some dialogue that is obviously contrived around a gag. The second act has much more pace and authenticity and the humour works much better. The final act is very static as it is really just about the five people telling one another what they are doing now. The idea of showing a group of friends as they change and grow apart over a number of years isn't particularly original but can still work extremely well, but though there are some nice moments in this one, it all feels very safe and cosy.

Where it scores really highly though is in the music. Songs such as 'Band of Gold', 'What Becomes of the Broken Hearted', 'When Will I see You Again', 'Reach Out I'll Be There', 'Lean On Me' and, of course, 'Up On The Roof' are given full five-part harmony barbershop-style arrangements from musical director Howard Gray and they sound stunning.

Gavin Spokes stands out as Keith, partly because he has the best lines (he is like the one in all the American high school comedies that is overweight with disgusting habits but with some great put-downs) but he also has the most natural delivery with superb comic timing plus he enters dressed as a Womble. Gemma White is also excellent as Angela who goes from nervous singer to... well, what's the most obvious twist you can give to a character who has no confidence in her singing ability and is always put down jokingly by her colleagues? Georgina White is perfect as the golden girl at university who gets top grades in everything. Stephen Fletcher is also good as Scott, the golden boy with the girl, the singing voice and the prospects. Christopher Pizzey seems to have a string of caricatures from the nerdy long-haired student to an Ayckbournesque pedant, but they fit reasonably well into the role.

As a play, it doesn't really get close to fulfilling its potential either in the comedy or in the more serious parts, but director Peter Rowe has created from it a production that is very entertaining and worth seeing for the singing alone, but there are also some high points in the comedy too,

especially in act two. In fact it is only just a few swear words away from being a decent piece of family entertainment.

Running until 1st May, 2010

Reviewer: [David Chadderton](#)