

## Theatre Review: Carnival of the Animals - Riverside Studios

The French composer Camille Saint-Saens wrote his short orchestral suite The Carnival of the Animals as a work of fun for his friends, and did not permit a public performance during his lifetime. Since his death, the piece has become a firm family favourite in the concert hall, with many of its melodies, such as The Elephant, The Aquarium, Fossils and The Swan, achieving popular recognition. Composer Gavin Greenaway, lyricist Roger Hyams and book writer Andrew Marshall, along with director Thom Southerland and producer Brian Eastman, have now taken this music and worked it into a new stage musical, capturing the family appeal Saint-Saens first created.

The new musical is set in a quiet square in today's Paris, where The Carnival of the Animals is still being performed, over ninety years after its first outing. Under the patronage of the infamous fashion designer, Mademoiselle Parfait, played by the wonderful Anita Dobson, the legacy of Saint-Saens only just survives. The animals that now make up the show have lost their enthusiasm for the daily performances and are at odds with each other over the updating the show clearly needs. However, the squabbling animals, led by Odette the Swan (Bronte Barbe) and Henri the Lion (Jacob Chapman), are soon united by the arrival of four new animals, a Chimpanzee, Zebra, Parrot and Lioness, who are determined to revive the show and create Paris's newest musical sensation. No less disconcerted is Mademoiselle Parfait, who has a dark secret - revealed throughout the show!

The thing with new musicals is that they are either horrendous, or really good... and this one is really good! Some fabulous performances from all the ensemble, harmonies are strong throughout, with Bronte Barbe standing out at times with her soft yet powerful vocals. Anita Dobson is in fine form, with her droll French accent, and comedic facial expressions. Stephen Webb also shines as Pepe the Ass to Cassandra Compton's sexy Carmen. Paul Grunert (Plato the tortoise) and Claire Machin (Emilie the elephant) are also wonderful additions to the cast with fine voices and humour to boot.

The only problem with this show is the venue. For a start it needs air conditioning in Studio 3, it was uncomfortably hot last night, so well done to all the performers for sticking it out. Studio 3 is also really small to have a four piece band in there with drums and guitars, which are often too loud and vocals can't be heard as none of the cast are mic'd up, which it desperately needs to add more projection and depth to the vocals.

Overall though, this a great new musical, which in time will hopefully go into a bigger venue where it will certainly shine even more.

Four stars ★★☆☆ By Steve Stubbs

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