

Carnival of the Animals – Riverside Studios, London

Reviewer: Ian Foster

The Public Reviews Rating: ★★☆☆☆

Stephen Webb, Cassandra Compton and Jonny Fines in Carnival of the Animals Photo Credit Tristram Kenton Little is it known that Paris actually has 21 districts. And that in the 21<sup>e</sup> arrondissement, humans and animals live side by side. And that in that corner of Paris, they put on a show every day – the Carnival of the Animals. But the animals are tired, they've lost their enthusiasm for the theatre, their star turn has gone missing and they can't stop arguing. It is only when a chimpanzee, a zebra, a parrot and a lioness arrive breathlessly in the square, determined to join the carnival, that they decide to carry on, but the newcomers are hiding a secret. And watching over all of them is neighbourly dress-shop owner Mademoiselle Parfait, who despite her friendly demeanour perhaps isn't quite all she seems either.

Inspired by Saint-Saëns' musical opus of the same name, this Carnival of the Animals maintains a similar family friendly ambience to create a really rather charming piece of musical theatre. Andrew Marshall's book weaves a likeable story about finding one's own self-worth and appreciating others' differences in with the slightly darker sub-plot – nothing too sinister, think pantomime villainry – and the whole thing is peppered with a bunch of amiable songs from composer Gavin Greenaway and lyricist Roger Hyams.

There are definite shades of Stiles and Drewe here, not least in the hints of stories like Just So and Honk! But this is no bad thing, for Greenaway has captured much of the straightforward emotional immediacy of their music in creating a tunefully memorable score, full of songs with uncomplicated feelings. There's something hugely appealing about this directness – though aimed at the family market, when delivered by such a quality cast as Thom Southerland has gathered here, its charms broaden its audience.

From Bronté Barbé's reticent cygnet waiting for the chance to spread her wings to Liam Doyle's rascally chimp looking for the chance to do right, from Alastair Brookshaw's mynah bird with his unheard operatic impressions to Claire Machin's unusually forgetful elephant, this is a show of delicious performances full of huge warmth and no little humour. Brookshaw's tap routine with Matthew Gent's parrot is wonderful, the burgeoning relationship between the lions is lovely to behold and at the centre of it all is a remarkably energetic and zany performance from Anita Dobson as the exaggeratedly Gallic shopkeeper.

That this production only ran from 10 shows feels a real shame and one can only hope that it is a precursor to some kind of future life whether here at the Riverside Studios or somewhere else. For it truly deserves – set, costume and lighting design are all ingeniously conceived, the score is the equal of many a new West End musical, and if there's a little evening out of the tone necessary – the odd gag felt a little misplaced – it is easily fixed and then one really will be able to say c'est parfait!

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