



**Reviewer: Peter McGarry - Leamington Observer**

It's a fair old step from idealism to cynicism – and when you're going backwards, it becomes more of a giant stride. This is the way things work in Stephen Sondheim's showbiz musical which, in effect, challenges its players to un-develop their characters over the course of two acts. The aim is certainly achieved here through James Suckling's vigorous direction and a generally high standard of performance.

For audiences now more attuned to the gimmick with similar techniques having been employed by other writers such as Harold Pinter, it is more easy to swallow. The question remains of the actual relevance of going back to front.

Perhaps the answer lies somewhere in the fact that the second act and its final scenes are much better than the first. Our three central characters are happily expanding their optimistic dreams from the rooftop of a Manhattan tenement. Spirits are high and fun is in the air, but we already know they are going to end up bitter and disillusioned.

The descent through some 25 years to that tenement block is brilliantly underpinned by Chris Gilbey-Smith as Frank, the one-time composer who has sold out his musical talents for a top-flight career in the movie business. His initial swagger, to the obvious contempt of everyone around him, is powerfully conveyed and then cleverly diluted as the years drop away. Others take longer to get into their stride. By Act Two, Justin Steer and Vicky Holding are in full swing as the other members of Frank's team, sharing the ups and downs as their careers struggle to advance. At this point there is also fine work by Rebecca Shaw as Frank's betrayed wife, pouring out her heart in the song Not a Day Goes By, and Nelle Cross as the exotic Hollywood vamp who cunningly steals her man.

Company vocal work under conductor Liam Walker is impressive, despite tunes which are unmemorable and lyrics which are far from the best of Sondheim.

Within its own context, this is an evening of high professionalism.

**Reviewer: Nick Le Mesurier – Leamington Courier**

The ups and downs of show biz life were never more starkly revealed than in Stephen Sondheim's hit musical Merrily We Roll Along. It's a tale of rags to riches, or rather riches to rags, as this story is told backwards. We first meet Frank Shepard, talented composer of smash-hit musicals, in the late 70s when he is at the height of his fame, but not as a composer. He's ditched the true love of his life, along with the friendship and loyalty of just about everyone who knows him, for Hollywood movie production and has made a lot of money in the process. The cost of his success is shown in a series of flashbacks over the years as we see Frank and his best friend and lyricist Charley Kringas regress to the point where they started as two young hopefuls, when what mattered was not just the music but the love.

The cast perform brilliantly. Chris Gilby-Smith is mesmeric as Frank, both innocent and guilty, a victim as well as a survivor, who gorges on success. Justin Steer is poignant as his nerdy, sincere, good-hearted lyricist friend Charley, who offstage wins a Pulitzer Prize for a stage play but is left behind in the gold rush that is Hollywood. I loved Vicky Holding's performance as Mary, a one-hit novelist who has turned bitter through her unrequited love of Frank. And Nelle Cross as the seductress Gussie Carnegie beautifully embodied the ruthlessness that is the true spirit of Hollywood and Broadway.

The songs may not be the most hummable you've ever heard. But they and the story have a sticking power that remains with you. It's a bold, intelligent and ambitious production that brings depth to the dazzle.





