

I knew very little about *Encore* before the show suffice to say that I understood they were a relatively new company keen to tackle new and more contemporary productions, the last being *Bad Girls*. Well now it seems, it was the turn of the boys! *The Full Monty* is by now a very familiar story. Originally set in Sheffield, the story has made the transition across the Atlantic and has been playing to UK audiences since 2002. I wondered whether Americanising the story would bother me ... it didn't. I was sat in the stalls anticipating what I suspected was going to be an entertaining show when the realisation dawned upon me. The Brindley Theatre was bursting with a highly charged and expectant FEMALE audience. I suddenly felt a tad uncomfortable but this didn't last long.

The opening or prologue (or was this a taster of what was to come) was totally unexpected and whipped the audience up into a frenzy. I'm still not sure whether this was scripted or an additional treat for the eyes. It was a very confident performance from Stuart Niven whose assets were clearly evident and who clearly played to his strengths. It was all done, as they say, "... in the best possible taste!" Then from behind the curtain emerged what can only be described as the gloriously camp Nick Cupit as 'Master of Ceremonies'. I should seriously consider using this to introduce all future shows. It certainly beats the usual monotone over the PA.

The show was very well cast with the whole ensemble putting in fine performances. I would like to highlight some outstanding performances. Tony Avery (*Jerry Lukowski*); Bryan Higgins (*Dave Bukatinsky*); Kit Phillips (*Malcolm MacGregor*); Mark Robinson (*Horse*); and Julie Parry (*Jeanette Burmeister*). Good direction by Nick Cupit ensured everyone appeared very natural and at home in their role. Tony Avery kicked off the drama in fine style with a very fine rendition of *Scrap* setting the tone and the standard for the whole show. It would be very easy for the role of *Dave Bukatinsky* to be overshadowed by the other stronger characters unless of course it is played with the subtlety and intuition you might expect from a professional actor. This is precisely what we saw in Bryan Higgins portrayal of the character. Kit Phillips as *Malcolm MacGregor* was awkwardly brilliant. Mark Robinson's *Horse* was delightful. He carried the role with a sort of gormless grace and was full of surprises. Julie Parry put in a sterling performance as *Jeanette Burmeister* and with a maturity well beyond her years. Joel Bevan playing *Ethan Girard* produced a fine performance which certainly brought out the humour of the role. Amanda Carr (*Vicky Nichols*) did surprisingly well considering she was fighting a bad cold I understand. Paul Davies, on loan (*I hope*) from *Rainhill Musical Theatre Company*, did extremely well filling the dancing shoes of *Harold Nichols*. Gemma Thorniley (*Pam Lukowski*) and Claire Jackson (*Georgie Bukatinsky*) both put in good performances. Finally, I would like to commend the youngest performer on stage, for a very confident performance. To play alongside such accomplished actors must have been a daunting prospect but Joe Chomelondley playing *Nathan Lukowski* ('*Nathe*') did not once appear phased by this.

The action was accompanied by an excellent score that was faultlessly orchestrated by Craig Stewart as MD. The songs are melodic, instantly likeable and already up there amongst my favourites. The whole show was brimming with humour and sensitivity and the songs reflect this. From the black humour of '*Big-Ass Rock*', '*Big Black Man*' and '*The Goods*' to the sensitivity of '*You Rule My World*', '*Breeze Off the River*' and '*You Walk with Me*'. Every musical number was accomplished and would not have been out of place on any West End stage. Choreography was ably provided by Lyndsey Florin who ensured the high energy of the show was not going to be left floundering by the choreography and maintained this pace from curtain up to curtain down.

The set was effective and scene changes were smooth. The only aspect of the show I could question was in casting the roles of the ladies from the retirement home, in the run through rehearsal scene. I thought it a shame that they could not have been played by older actors. Then again as the company is largely made up of younger performers, some compromises have to be made.

I could not finish my review without making reference to the finalé. The ultimate de-robing sequence was finely tuned and perfectly timed and did not disappoint the hugely appreciative audience.

*Encore* members should be greatly encouraged by this production. The Chairman and Producer of the show (Nick Cupit) was honest enough to point out in the programme that the process of getting the show to the stage had not been an easy one. Well I can say with certainty that all the hard work and tenacity paid off. I hope *Encore* continue to be bold and take on other ambitious shows. If their vigour for producing wonderful shows continues, they will have no problems getting audiences to come and watch them.