

Feedback for Summer Show 2017: 'Follies'

The feedback has been broken down into subcategories to best express the group 'collective' opinion where possible. Where opinions differed or contrary in nature, the liaison has attempted to present both sides, though not in a majority-minority fashion.

As this feedback is for the benefit of the society to improve future shows, specifically in this slot, any comments which were unnecessarily aggressive, or used to attack individuals rather than their approach, have been omitted.

Where possible, the liaison has utilised direct quotes.

Rehearsal Experience:

Most feedback reflected a general improvement on the organisation of the show after the first few weeks, most pointing to a timetable revamp and a more equal splitting of acting, singing and dancing rehearsals. There were a few who maintained that the process focused too much on the direction despite this timetable alteration, with choreography suffering as a result. There were several comments highlighting how cast members do not mind rehearsals finishing at the allotted time: 'rehearsals weren't used to their fullest and occasionally ended at 8 rather than continuing til 10'. Cast members had already scheduled this time to rehearse and so finishing early, when there were things left to perfect, angered some individuals. One response described the process as 'consistently inefficient', with time not being utilised properly, and as a result, intensive week being crammed. It should be noted, however, that whilst the process started later than intended for this slot, there were several individuals who unexplainably missed rehearsals earlier in the process, and feedback from individuals suggested that people need to be 'prepared' and 'committed' from day one. Some cast numbers noted that they production team were not at fault for the time constraints that came with the slot, one person describing this as 'unavoidable'.

It should be noted that there were several responses which stated that the experience was a lot of fun, and that some cast members tended to be overly negative about trivial and unnecessary aspects. There was some critique over cast bonding, most responses pointed to a lack of big scenes which would have boosted bond opportunities and a need for more group activities before rehearsals such as games and Just Dances. There was praise for the experience of smaller group bonding, with one individual noting that: "Due to the nature of the show, I got really friendly with a smaller group of people which was lovely."

Others also commended the production team for 'pulling a Sondheim together in what was effectively 4 weeks of rehearsals', alongside an enjoyable experience.

Direction:

The directors were praised for their enthusiasm within the show, with most comments noting their constant 'passion'. 'Both of them were super dedicated - I can't count the number of times I saw them blocking in the Bridge and talking about the show.'

Some individuals observed, and apologised for, the cast mistreating Barney and Victoria because of their inexperience. Some members noted that others felt they could get away with things they wouldn't be able to do in front of more experienced directors. Others suggested that they were 'basically too nice', especially in relation to cast members attendance and learning lines.

Barnaby specifically received a few comments within feedback which highlighted ways in which his approach to directing, specifically as a team, could be improved. A number of people commented how Victoria was often pushed aside as 'an AD in a few rehearsals' despite Victoria demonstrating her capability in rehearsals were Barnaby was not present: 'There was occasionally a sense from Barnaby still thought of himself as 'Lead Director', even after Victoria was moved up to Co-Director with him.'

Character work was an aspect commonly picked up for improvement, and this is an aspect in which future directors should pay note to. In Follies, some cast members noted how they felt like they 'had no creative input over [their] movements on stage'. Blocking was specific and there was limited room for creativity from the actors, which in turn, lowered morale and confidence in their portrayals. In future, directors and actors should make sure they are working together to build characters which both the performer and director understand: 'It's not a bad thing to put your hands up and say you're wrong or to change your mind about something because sometimes it can be for the better.' Despite this, there were an equal number of responses which praised the directors, and Victoria in particular, for their creativity with character ticks and communication of ideas. Victoria was also praised for her calm approach to direction.

The feedback often concluded that whilst there were issues with the approach of directors to rehearsals, they did a successful job in directing the show as first-timers, noting that 'they did a brilliant job with a very sparse script' and a difficult show. Future directors should note that being open to cast input on characterisation, even in such a crammed timeframe, can lead to a more fulfilling experience for the cast and more committed characters on stage.

There was little to no comment on Jamie's role as a Supervising Director, however, this will be built upon later in the A.O.B. section.

Production:

Costumes:

Charlie was praised for her innovation and general brilliance, which continues the process of a Charlie, often House, being praised in every show. The hair and makeup were also praised for their brilliance, and the cast recognised the amount of time and effort she put into creating 'fantastic costumes'.

There was an issue with the timing of costumes, with the show girl outfits only being available for tech run: 'The costumes should have been done earlier. This stressed people out, especially the girls with their revealing outfits. One commenter suggested that production could only be a more enjoyable experience on both ends if it was mandatory that future shows guarantee that 'all costumes [are] to be ready for the first day of intensive.' One production team member noted that the costumes were planned to be completed by the start of intensive week and that it was disappointing this could not be followed through. Some cast members noted how the problem was not the revealing element but that they received them late 'many [individuals] costumes had to be re sewn and taken in by the cast members themselves, and overall it was made extremely stressful for everyone involved' because of the limited time constraints.

For those who were not affected by late or revealing costumes, there was nothing but praise for Charlie. The only other aspect with which future producers could improve on, is making sure they are a known presence at early rehearsals, so cast members feel involved and aware of their role. In future productions, this improved communication between the producers and the cast would avoid situations where the cast receive late costumes, which is especially important in the summer slot where the Easter break is an inconvenience for costume testing. For summer show, any costumes should therefore be discussed, tried out and either approved or amended ideally before the Easter break.

As with most feedback, there needs to be an emphasis on what could be improved in the process and what can be learnt for the future. Jess' approach to her role in the production came under some criticism. Responses pointed to her lack of attendance during intensive week, the poor level of show promotion achieved from low quality programmes, and cast not having flyers in time for intensive or show week. In the future, production teams should ensure that their publicity producer(s) receives the support they need, and that the producer is fully committed by being kept in the know and on a tight schedule. There is also a need on the producer's part for them to be fully committed to the show and confident with the publicity aspect of producing.

Choreography:

Most cast members noted that dance rehearsals were enjoyable: 'for the most part, lots of fun, generally really chilled, and the nicest rehearsals to attend with a great sense of team effort'. Claire also received a large amount of praise: 'The choreography was done really well from my point of view. Claire helped us whenever we needed it.'

The earliest dance rehearsals came under criticism for being under-prepared. Some feedback suggested a few songs were choreographed on the spot, such as 'Who's the Woman' which 'took 5 rehearsals to teach and was not complete until intensive.'

For the most part, feedback suggested that Claire had done a great job at creating innovative choreography, and that, apart from early time management, she had done a brilliant job.

Musical Direction:

The most common response for 'What could be improved about the musical direction' was: 'I can't think of anything'. The negative aspects of the feedback can be summarised in one response: It was 'sad they couldn't have a harp'.

Joe and Ben were praised in particular for their help with character work in songs, and audience members' feedback stated how well they connected to characters in particular thanks to the ability and effort of cast members in songs: 'Joe was especially good at teaching new techniques that I have never used before and both Joe and Ben were great at giving a really good idea of how the songs were meant to be performed'.

Some rare comments for improvement were focusing on the MDs being too nice and making sure they retain both authority, and ensure that those they taught are singing their harmony lines: 'If cast members are blatantly not singing in songs in which they should be, they should be told off/told to sing. Certain cast members openly did not sing in group numbers when they were supposed to, but they were not once challenged about this.'

Tech:

'The unsung heroes for Showstoppers shows' were widely praised, once again, for their role in the show's success. Many also thanked StageSoc for their consistent brilliance across all our productions this year: 'Smashing job as always, thanks StageSoc!' A number of people commented on the commitment of the techies and the quality of the set production, specifically the curtains and falling banners.

Many praised the ability to use the Annex in intensive week as helping them understanding the space, and the ability to do the band call in the Annex was also great, (though notably these aspects will be limited to the Summer slot).

The new drum kit, purchased by Showstoppers committee recently, also received praise: 'The electric drum kit was awesome!'

There was some criticism from cast members that the staging was too restrictive for the dances to be a success. (It should be noted that cast members rightfully did not direct these complaints at StageSoc in feedback, though due to the nature of staging the liaison felt it appropriate to place these comments here). It is important to note that directors need to be aware of the cast needs and space requirements, and be willing to adapt to suit these needs.

There was one comment for improval which pointed at the desire to use the beige headset microphones rather than the black taped on ones.

One techie was criticised for their approach during the Tech Run: 'The tech run felt like a bit of a waste of an opportunity... [one individual] was adamant that it was just to be a cue-to-cue lights run.' A few comments noted that the Tech Run did finish earlier than usual, and that given this early finish, there might have been time to run a few dance numbers in the space. One commenter suggested that they thought 'most people would have been cool with staying a little bit later if the tech run itself had been a bit more involving for everyone.' It is important to realise that the Tech Run is for the purposes of StageSoc, and as such the production team should make the cast aware that there will be limited time, if any, to run things.

AOB:

- There was an unpretendingly high number of feedback comments submitted from the cast which did not contain names. It should also come as limited surprise that these comments were the most critical, and in some places, unnecessarily harsh as to attack individuals rather than provide useful feedback both for the individual and for future productions. There is obviously the benefit of getting more accurate and honest feedback without people attaching their names, but it might be worth making that a mandatory field in the response box, both so that any issues can be discussed by the liaison with the commenter post-show, and so that they remember they are making comments to improve rather than purely to criticise.
- In relation to Jamie's role as a Supervising Director, there was little comment made within feedback. Jamie's role was mostly identified as a liaison, and since I was involved in the show I will provide a brief comment from my own feedback: 'Though there was little choice at the time, and I myself thought it a good idea, it would have been beneficial to have a separate liaison, as there were times when communication between myself and the directors was complicated by me attempting to fulfil both roles'.
- As with other shows this year, there needs to be an understanding between production team members of what their role consists of, so that producers know what they need to source, and that directors and choreographers do not overstep their boundary and try to get involved with each-others spheres. Similarly, 'the Prod team should be supporting each other, not complaining to the cast about each other', as this doesn't help with morale.
- There was an issue whereby one member fell ill and could not attend intensive week, and so was replaced during dress run of the production, and was only informed of this on that day (Tuesday of Show Week). If this issue had been presented during the casting process the production team would have maintained a rightful ability to turn down this individual, after all intensive week is a vital part of the process, especially in Summer show. However, in this case where the absence could not be avoided, it is important to remember that Showstoppers do shows for enjoyment sake. The quality of the show is of course important, but it is of secondary importance to the enjoyment of our members and it is suggested that in future production teams remember this for similar scenarios.

Some Quotes to Summarise the great experience:

'We pulled off a great show'

'It was a fantastic experience!'

'It was mainly a great show with a ton of hard working people on it and the hard work really showed.'