



Front Row Review: *The Commitments*

Do the 'saviours of soul' successfully transfer Roddy Doyle's story to the West End stage? Rob Yandell went to the Palace Theatre to catch the show and find out.

We all know that there have been a number of books and films given the West End musical treatment in the last few years. Some have been great fun while some of the ideas have made me shudder, as producers and theatres seek a safe, popular bet in a competitive market.

When I first heard that the world premiere of *The Commitments* would be coming to a London stage my reaction was one of surprise. It had seemed an obvious choice and hard to believe that it hadn't been done before. I am sure there have been many attempts.

I for one welcomed the news (not a shudder in sight) because although I haven't read the original book by Roddy Doyle, I have enjoyed the excellent film adaptation a number of times. It seemed to me that there should be no reason why a story centred very much on the music wouldn't be a resounding success.

It's a fun and invigorating tale about how Jimmy Rabbitte pulls together a rowdy bunch of Northside Dubliners to form one hell of a soul band. As the scenes are set the dialogue is fast, frantic and at times colourful. I had to concentrate to understand the lines at times, but it's funny, light, sweet and certainly raises a smile.

Of course, you want the show to stay faithful to the story but I would have liked to have seen it pushed a little further to allow us to tap our feet to the beat earlier than 25 minutes in. Is it a musical, is it a play with musical performances? I wasn't quite sure; but considering it's the music and the performances of the 'hardest working band in the world' that glue everything together it seemed a long wait until the show gathered real momentum despite its fast-paced narrative and slick interchanging sets.

It felt as though it took an hour until the show really got going which I suppose unsurprisingly coincided with the band's first live gig just prior to the interval. Of course, and despite trying

not to, I found it hard not to make the comparison to the film: the story, the characters, the music.

Denis Grindel is making his West End debut in *The Commitments* as Jimmy Rabbitte and although he's full of energy I found it difficult to warm to his character. It was really the band's lead singer I was most interested in; I found Andrew Strong's movie portrayal of Deco Cuffe in the film worked brilliantly because you couldn't associate his unlikeable character and 'ugly mug' with such breath-taking vocals. It was a little hard to digest the same character being the target of screams and wolf whistles, and even a cry of "you're gorgeous", but you couldn't argue with Killian Donnelly's amazing tone as he belted out soul classics such as *I Heard It Through The Grapevine* and *Mustang Sally*.

The performance of a talented cast grew throughout and the whole show was highly entertaining. The second half supplied more and more energy as the band's turbulent evolution endured on off-stage spats while creating on-stage chemistry.

Joey 'The Lips' Fagan, played competently by Ben Fox, was usually at the centre of any animosity, despite his likeable nature and godly persona; his shaggy hair attracting the attention of the band's trio of female vocalists in more ways than one. But it's the volatile Deco who creates the most tension as we follow the story to see if this brilliant band can stay the distance.

I could have had the last 15 minutes of the show over and over again as *The Commitments* took us all out of our seats; this is what we came for, I thought. The question posed at the very start of "could an Irish fella sing this stuff" was emphatically answered with a finale of *Try A Little Tenderness* that ensured I left the theatre having digested enough soul for me to want a second helping sometime soon. ■



***The Commitments* is currently playing at the Palace Theatre, London with performance times Tuesday to Sunday at 7.30pm, with Saturday and Sunday matinees at 3pm. Group discounts are available Tuesday to Thursday and on Sundays. The show is currently booking until 19th October 2014.**

📄 www.thecommitmentslondon.com