



## [Footloose](#) at [Palace Theatre](#)

Reviewed by [Matthew Dougall](#) March 2016

Manchester Palace Theatre plays host this week to the stage version of the well-known and loved film **Footloose**, from the mid 1980s about a city teenager and his mother who move to a small town in Bible-Belt country where the town has outlawed dancing. He falls in love with the Preacher's daughter, and turns things around, bringing back both dancing and happiness to a town living in the sorrows of the past.

It is a high energy, feel-good show, and with the catchy title track and the song made famous by Bonnie Tyler, 'I Need A Hero' / 'I'm Holding Out For A Hero', then what is there not to like about this show? Well for me, there were several things, which, sadly, stop me from being as up-beat and as positive as I would've liked to have been.

Last night was the first night and Press Night, and the understudy for the principal role of Ren took the lead. This I am sure would only happen under exceptional circumstances, and of course, shouldn't be a problem from the audience's perspective - unless of course the understudy isn't actually up to speed. I am sure that **Thomas Cotran**, the young actor who stepped up to the line and performed

*Ren McCormick*

last night was indeed a very talented young man. What he lacked I feel was practice in some of the songs and dances he was required to do. They came across as a good effort but often not really hitting the mark. This was nowhere more apparent than in the gym scene, where he has a solo dance in the Musical Break which requires him to do various flashy dance stunts, and doesn't pull any one of them off. That was such a pity, because I really enjoyed his acting, and the scene he has with Ariel, the second time they visit the railroad and the moment they discover that they truly love each other was both tender and real.

The second thing to irritate me was the music. Rather than having a dedicated band, the cast doubled as the band, and when not actually acting played either a piano on one side of the stage, a keyboard and strings on the opposite side, and carried around with them various other brass and woodwind instruments slung around their necks and played even during the choreography and chorus singing. All of this looked distinctly odd and distracting. It also detracted from the false reality which is difficult enough to create without adding further to it by having principals walk around with a trumpet in their hands!

To compound this, a large and conspicuous cage construction had been built into the set which housed the drum kit, and the drummer, **David Keech**, who was also the Musical Director. This cage affair took up too much room and had too much prominence in what was already a very minimalistic and barely functional set. The top of the cage had metal plates which, during certain lighting plots, gave the whole reflection of the lamp's beam and thus created an extra and unwanted light.

And, whilst I am writing about the lighting then this was my third concern. When the lighting was good, it worked wonderfully; however, when the lighting was bad - which was often - it was awful. The design, by **Humphrey McDermott**, simply failed on several occasions to light the principals. Several instances over several songs where more than one singer was involved saw the principal singer fully lit whilst those who also needed to be lit were singing and / or dancing in either semi or total darkness. The body-level lamps attached to the edge of the prosc arch didn't completely light the desired area either, and the follow spot for one solo was so jerky I started watching the light beam and not the performer.

If you add to all of this, that the set was very poorly designed - using school PE benches for a church pews, and being able to see the cast climbing the set at the other side of the revolve whilst action took place on the audience-facing side, and other such things. If you add to this the fact that the gauze curtain used in the opening sequence and a couple of other scenes was beyond amateurish; a child's drawing of a city skyline in brown and an out-of-focus projection of the word 'Footloose'. If you also add to this that the Rev. Moore, played by **Nigel Lister**, really didn't have the singing voice to cope with this show's demands. And if you add to this the fact that during some of the sections of dialogue, two of the girls spoke so quickly without enunciating properly, it became impossible to understand them; and you can easily see why I am unable to come away from this production full of praise.

What I can praise though is the acting / singing / dancing / musicianship of the cast. It is not an easy thing and really something of a casting nightmare to try and find such a multi-talented ensemble. In particular I really liked among the second principals both **Scott Haining** as Bickle and **Natas ha Brown** as Wendy-Jo. The preacher's wife was played with unerring realism by **Maureen Nolan**, and was actually the only cast member not to pick up an instrument.

The female star of the show, the preacher's rebel daughter, was played in this production with sass and vigour by **Hannah Price**. A full-on tour-de-force performance, and a lovely voice too. The male star, despite taking the second male lead, was the hapless, shy, country-bumpkin with a heart and soul, Willard, played here by **Gareth Gates**. I think I must have been spending much of my time dreaming away in Kansas because I have to confess that up until yesterday I had neither heard of nor seen Gareth Gates before, and did not realise at all that he was such a celebrity. Having never watched Pop Idol or any of the other similar TV instant fame machines, I found myself watching a performer for the first time last night without any prior knowledge of him. To be honest I think this might have worked in his favour. I found him an extremely personable and instantly likeable performer, a very good singer and dancer, but I also found that the further into the show we went, the more he seemed to play up to the whip-woeing and screaming from the audience. He is something of a sex symbol, that much is clear - especially in the Hero song when he delights the women by dancing in a pair of hot pants and little else - but he did tend to play the role more and more as a caricature rather than a character which was rather a shame. What I did wonder though was, why wasn't he playing the lead role of Ren?

If I had to sum up my feelings towards what I witnessed last night then it would be this. An extremely talented and high-energy cast either misused or underused and struggling with technical insufficiencies. At a smaller, less prestigious venue, then you may well be able to get away with this show as it is, but this was at Manchester's premier venue and shows going there should really be utterly top-notch. There is that expectation.