Thoroughly Modern Millie
at Palace Theatre, Manchester
Reviewed by Matthew Dougall May 2017

Originally conceived as a vehicle for the great Julie Andrews, this is a Musical that you think you ought to know. It seems somehow familiar, and one or two of the songs you seem to recall, and yet after watching tonight's production, I really don't think I have seen it before. At least not this version. It is fresh, alive, vibrant, and funny, and try as I might, there is no way in the world I could imagine Julie Andrews playing the lead character the way it was done this evening.

Thoroughly Modern Millie was written by **Richard Morris** (book), **Dick Scanlan** (book and lyrics), and **Jeanine Tesori** (music), and is a Musical Comedy in the traditional sense. There is dialogue between the songs, there is dancing, laughter, larger-than-life characterisations, comedy, love, a little intrigue, more

love, and a happy ending for all! Not a swear word or sex in sight! A truly feel-good family friendly evening's entertainment! Lovely.

With a strong and upbeat score, played expertly by the 8-piece band, directed by **Bob Wicks**, the music this evening was in excellent hands, and the singing from all exceptional. The directing and choreography (
Racky Plews
) was generally good. It did feel a little false at times, and moments where the cast seemed to be labouring unnecessarily; and as great as the dancing was, it was a little uncoordinated in places too; but the idea, the energy and the sheer up-beat-ness of the music and show took the spotlight away from these minor flaws.

The set was a large art-deco, gilted arch affair with smaller add-ons for each scene. It was simple, minimalist, and in period. It was sufficient but only that. And on a couple of occasions proved just exactly how flimsy and insubstantial it all was as it wobbled and refused to move when prompted to do so by stage-hands.

The lead role of Millie was played by **Joanne Clifton**. Her interpretation of this role was gutsy and 21st century Girl-power-esque, but it had heart and was truly a fully-rounded and heart-felt performance. Musicals of this genre are notorious for writing characters which are more or less mono-dimensional; but with what little back-story had been given her, she used this to her best advantage. Her singing was strong and lyrical and her dancing wonderful. And as every Musical aficionado knows, a leading lady needs a leading man. In this case, two! The very personable
Sam Barrett
played the role of Jimmy Smith; the young man who eventually steals her heart. A very pleasing stage presence and a lovely build-up of chemistry between him and Millie. Whilst the thoroughly modern Millie makes her own future and finds her own man, her boss Trevor Graydon was played by

Graham McDuff
. A truly talented performer with a rich, mellow voice McDuff proved he could not just sing and dance brilliantly, but his physical comedy skills came in very handy this evening too.

After the atrocities of the evening before, Manchester was left a little down-beat, and many of the audience this evening had decided to stay away from the city. There was talk of cancelling the show, but in the true Manchester and Theatrical spirits the show must go on. We were all in the need of laughter and respite from the horror, and with this very firmly in mind, McDuff took the bull by the horns and extemporised and ad-libbed his drunken scene surprising his fellow actors making them corpse and us howl with laughter. Under any other circumstance this would have been a complete no-no; but in the circumstances totally understandable, acceptable and we were all immensely thankful for it too!

Millie's best friend (every leading lady must have one! - those are the rules) was played by **Kath erine Glover**
. Another actress with a great stage presence, and easy style. I loved her soft soprano voice.

The comedy baddie (yes, there was even one of those too!) was played here by **Lucas Rush**. He runs a hotel for young waifs and strays and once he realises they are orphans, drugs them and sends them off to East Asia to work as sex slaves! So he dresses as an Oriental lady, calling himself Mrs Meers. Aiding and abetting him in this are two Chinese assistants - Ching Ho (**Ni ck Len**
) and Bun Foo (
Andy Yau
). And it was in this trio that I felt the lack of comedy, realism, direction and interest fell. I felt for a start that this was in danger very much so of becoming a pantomime where Mrs Meers is Widow Twankey with the two bumbling comedy Chinese policemen which are so often a feature

of the genre. I think a definite rethink on costume and character for Mrs Meers is necessary to take us away from this, and although I appreciated the Chinese, it would have been much funnier in broken English. No-one understood them.

All in all though, this was much-needed light relief for a traumatised Manchester, and the cast did everything in their power to allow us to let our hair down and enjoy their talents and performances. The standing ovation was truly deserved, and yes, book Musicals of yesteryear still do have a very firm place in the contemporary repertoire. Delightful!