


Edinburgh Festival Fringe 2017 : Fitz Barbershop and the Fitz Sirens at the Fringe: AcaDemic II ****




In 2016 the Sirens and Barbers of Fitzwilliam College wowed their Fringe audiences. Now it's 2017 and, in the immortal words of Gloria Gaynor, they're back.

Since their last appearance in Edinburgh, the oldest *cappella* groups in Cambridge have been to China; that trip included a televised performance in front of 10,000 people. Thankfully, they're still prepared to sing to us.

The line-up has changed a little, but there are plenty of familiar faces, and we know we're in safe hands as soon as we see those boater-clad heads waiting in the Space Triplex lobby. The weather is much the same as last year – it's known as 'an Edinburgh summer' – the queues are long and crushed; we all need a bit of energising – and that's what we get when the Sirens open with Duffy and Steve Booker's *Mercy*.

This is a song that's been endlessly covered, used in TV  and film themes and even featured in a FIFA 09 game. Duffy's version has been viewed on Youtube over 60 million times. No pressure then, but the Sirens take it in their stride, with **Alice French** leading well, and a strong backing line held together by the outstanding **Nadia Bates** (more of her later...)

Think of *Fever* and you think of Peggy Lee. Or you do if you're my age. If you're not you probably think of Beyoncé. Either  way, it's an iconic song (Lee's version – largely rewritten

by her, though she was never credited – was described by one critic as ‘sizzling’); get it wrong and you’ll wish you’d not gone there. The Sirens get it right, and the reason they do so is Nadia Bates, who gives a tremendous solo performance. As well as having a wonderfully mellow voice, Bates is also very aware of her gestures; she moves well, never looks gauche, and at all times engages the audience. (A little more confidence in these areas would benefit some of the other girls, who do sometimes look slightly uptight – we *want* to see you, you don’t need to look embarrassed!)

If there’s one thing Cambridge choral scholars rarely lack it’s confidence. (‘We’re the best barbershop group at the Fringe...because we’re the only one.’) The Barbers come flying onto the stage, all multi-coloured waistcoats and multi-spotted socks, and from that very moment they have the audience in their (metaphorical...) hands. Their rendition of *Goodbye My Coney Island Baby* is as good as it’s always been, moving seamlessly from smooth harmonies to camped up Cossack dancing and back again. **Isaac Jarratt Barnham’s** falsetto is fabulous, and something that we’d like to hear more of – Bee Gees’ covers next year boys? You know you want to.


The Barbers have synchronisation (and no doubt syncopation) down to a T; there’s rarely a false move, and the various comedy moments are always entertaining, whether they involve hat routines, line dances or simply meaningful expressions. In the latter **Neil Grant** continues to excel, but he’s got strong competition from **James Veale** and **Jonas Rasmussen**, born entertainers both.

Charlie Chaplin wrote the first, instrumental, version of *Smile* in 1936 for his film *Modern Times*. Luckily Nat King Cole added some words a few years later, and here it is well performed by **Jake Glidden** and **Jonno Goldstone**, with excellent backing from Jonas Rasmussen’s bass voice.

Loch Lomond is a Scottish classic. It’s brought tears to

the eyes at the end of many a tartan dinner dance over the years, though it gained a good deal more street cred when Celtic rock band Runrig added it to their playlist. The Barbers don't actually have a Scottish singer – but they do have the exceptional **Bowen Wang**, who may be from Northern Ireland but whose impressive tenor solo more than does justice to the old bonny banks. But the boys don't want you to be bored – so after much sombre posing with hats in hands, they segue into a fast and furious hornpipe, complete with hilarious hip wiggling, before completing the song in traditional Scottish fashion.

The Sirens end their set with a strong cover of Crystal Gale's country hit *Don't It Make My Brown Eyes Blue* and a rendition of *California Dreamin'* that Mama Cass herself would have been proud of. Nadia Bates again excels, but **Louise Harris** also gets into her stride, with great body language and confidence.

I'm still not quite sure about the girls' cover of *I Will Survive* . This is a powerful, highly-charged feminist/gay anthem; a poll in *Rolling Stone* magazine placed it second only to *Stayin' Alive* in 'The Best Disco Songs of All Time.' It needs to be sung *loud* and, I feel, with a little more abandon than the Sirens allow themselves. It's a wonderful, inspiring song that everyone loves – with a bit more welly it could be so much more exciting. Having said that, Saturday's audience loved it – the lady next to me was foot-tapping away with gay (or not) abandon.

Last year the Barbers ended the show with a soaring version of *Bohemian Rhapsody*. Can they top that? Their final offerings this time are first *When Somebody Loved Me*, a real tear-jerker from *Toy Story 2*, the solo beautifully sung by Nick Grant, then a medley of songs from Disney's *The Hunchback of Notre Dame*. This is a brilliant choice, combining as it does Nick's doom-laden narrative of the story of Quasimodo with the chanting of the Latin mass. (They are choral scholars after all.) And in the background the bells, from Jonas Rasmussen's

✘ bass to Isaac Jarratt Barnham and James Veale's falsetto highs, continue to ring out like doom. Does that top old Scaramouche? I think it does. A thrilling end to an upbeat, entertaining show, one that was hugely enjoyed by everyone present – as was evidenced by the numerous compliments being handed out as the audience left. I met a couple from Long Island. The weather, they said, was not quite like home – but the show more than made up for that and they'd definitely be back next year.

We look forward to AcaDemic III in 2018!

Fitz Barbershop and the Fitz Sirens at the Fringe: AcaDemic II was at Space Triplex.

Fitz Barbershop can be contacted for bookings (they also offer school workshops) via their website [here](#). The Fitz Sirens can be contacted via their Facebook page [here](#).