

ALFIE, THE MUSICAL

Coliseum Theatre, Oldham

I was as captivated by this engaging musical as I was by Bill Champion's performance as the cockney charmer, Alfie.

Eden Phillips who wrote the book and lyrics for the show has succeeded in the aim of making Alfie, the Musical into neither a sung-through show, nor a play that stops every now and then for songs, but something in between.

The transitions from dialogue to music are seamless and the lyrics are witty, often risqué and very funny. They are complemented perfectly by John Cameron's music. There may not be any big hits – although the song My Turn Now could make it – but all the music is easy on the ear. This is no musical spectacular, but a cosy production which is ideally suited to the intimacy of the Coliseum.

Champion handles his audience with the same dexterity as Alfie handles his "birds" as he shares Alfie's outrageous thoughts about women. He beckons the audience to him like an elegant version of Max Miller, even holding up his hand at one stage to calm over-exuberant laughter. This is a masterly performance from the handsome Champion who can sing, dance, be hilariously funny one minute then immediately tug at our heartstrings the next. He captured Alfie's innate vulnerability marvellously.

As the women who are only too eager to be "pulled" by Alfie, Sarah Pelosi (Siddie), Julia Farino (Gilda), Corinna Powlesland (Lily), Karen Clegg (Annie) and Joanne Zorian (Ruby), are excellent. In particular, Farino has a superb singing voice shown to particular advantage in the aforementioned My Turn Now.

As the Hooray Henrietta types – The Chelsea Girls, Lorraine Chappel, Helen Goldwyn and Rachel Oliver – supply the chorus routines. They are particularly funny dressed as cowgirls in Your Best Friend's Not – a routine faintly reminiscent of one from Joseph and His Technicolor Dreamcoat.

Kenneth Alan Taylor's direction is flawless. But while I understand why he succumbed to the temptation to stage a big finish with the swinging The Summer of Love, I don't think it is needed. The show stands without that as a fresh and innovative musical and could have ended just as successfully on a sombre note.

Erna Naughton, widow of the late Bolton writer Bill Naughton, the author of the play Alfie, was at the first night star-studded audience. She, like the rest of us, seemed delighted with this new interpretation of Naughton's work.