

West End Eurovision 2019: A Reminder of the Talent and Supportive Community in the Theatre Industry

ARTS, THEATRE

Who doesn't love Eurovision? The complete lack of expectation for **any** UK contestant adds a *laissez faire* tone to the event that works indescribably well with the zaniness of individual performances. Want dancing old ladies? Look up Russia's 2012 entrance. Has the chicken dance from primary school never quite left your consciousness? Israel in 2018 had you covered. Eurovision is camp and fun, and we need more of that these days... cue *West End Eurovision*, a charity event where the casts from different shows compete with previous Eurovision songs to win the approval of a group of judges and the audience.

The seven shows competing were: *Only Fools and Horses*, *Everybody's Talking About Jamie*, *Aladdin*, *Mamma Mia!*, *Follies*, *The Phantom of the Opera*, and *Wicked*. Each cast performed for four judges – Amber Davies, Bonnie Langford, Wayne Sleep, and Tim Vincent – following a short ident. Quite what these were for I'm not sure was explained properly to the cast: are they adverts for their shows (*Everybody's Talking About Jamie*), adverts for the song they're to perform (*Phantom*) or adverts for Eurovision generally (*Mamma Mia!*)? I don't know, but they were all amusing and a good way to introduce each act.

The cast of *Only Fools and Horses* opened the show, though they unfortunately came last in the competition, a less-than-jubly result. That said, with sparkling costumes designed by Lisa Bridge, the performance of 'Dancing Lasha Tumbai', first performed by Ukraine in 2007, was certainly in the spirit of Eurovision and made for a sound opening number.

The winners of the evening, the cast of *Phantom of the Opera*. Photograph: Nicolas Chinardet
The casts of *Everybody's Talking About Jamie* and *Aladdin* followed with renditions of 'Toy' (Israel, 2018) and 'Monsters' (Finland, 2018) and upped the atmosphere in the room: both had full-on dance routines and a superb mid-

performance entrance by Layton Williams proved why everyone is talking about him.

The cast of *Mamma Mia!* ended the first half with 'Je Ne Sais Quoi' (Iceland, 2010), but it was the quartet of *Follies* girls that won the night for me. Singing in French, 'L'oiseau et L'enfant' (France, 1977) was elegant and beautiful, with costumes designed by Louise Merchant that were reminiscent of the Sondheim musical. The ladies of *Follies* showed that less is more, but when *The Phantom of the Opera*'s cast began to sing 'Grande Amore' (Italy, 2015), it was clear it would win the evening. The powerful song melted across the twelve singers on stage and the sheer force of vocal strength sent the audience into a rapturous response. It's little wonder this is the second year they have won in a row. *Wicked* finished the evening with 'Wild Dances' (Ukraine, 2004).

The entire evening was commendably hosted by Richard Gauntlett, whose quips about the longevity and imminent demise of certain shows consistently prompted a laugh from the audience. Only two aspects of the show were tiresome. Firstly, just Wayne Sleep's innuendos were amusing to begin with but quickly became tired. Secondly, and this was the biggest complaint of the evening, amidst both exquisite vocal talent and flawless dancing was Dana International, who in both her performances looked like she was lip-singing. This dip was clearly felt by the audience, whose smattering of applause after Dana's first song was indicative of the confusion and almost humour that came with this performer. Why Dana had two songs whilst everyone else had one is baffling, especially with Michael Rice, England's 2019 Eurovision representative, waiting in the wings.

West End Eurovision is a charity event for the Make A Difference Trust (MAD). Established in 2008, TheatreMAD fights against HIV and AIDS. All the casts and behind-the-scenes work was done on a voluntary basis and the influence the charity has on different groups – which include Mildmay, Children of Uganda, Chiva and the food chain – is exemplary and highly commendable. *West End Eurovision* reminds us not only of the talent on across London stages, but also of the warmth and support the entire community shares.

On the evening, the winners were:

Best ident – *Everybody's Talking About Jamie*

Best costume for 'outstanding gorgeousness' – *Phantom of the Opera*

The Judge's Award – *Wicked*

West End Eurovision Champion's Trophy – *Phantom of the Opera*

More information about MAD can be found here: <https://www.madtrust.org.uk>

Feature photograph: Gaz Sherwood



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