

Merrily We Roll Along

Music and Lyrics by Stephen Sondheim

Book by George Firth

At the WaterMill from 16th January – 8th March

The combination of John Doyle and the WaterMill is usually one to gladden the heart on a dank winter evening. But if you go in expectation of another Mack & Mabel or Hot Mikado, you'll be sadly disappointed.

Lacking drama and movement within a plot that's trying to be just too clever, this seems a deeply odd choice of play. It takes quite a while to understand what is actually going on, when finally it dawns that the story is being told backwards; and as the story rewinds from 1976 to 1959, it felt like we'd sat through every one of those 17 years.

In 1976, Frank (Sam Kenyon) is holding a party to celebrate the premier of his latest movie. While his success is obvious, he's paid a heavy price. His marriage to his second wife Gussie (a brilliant performance by Rebecca Jackson) is breaking down because of his affair with Meg (Emma Corelle); his best friend Mary (Elizabeth Marsh) gets drunk and offensive and he orders her to leave, their friendship at an end; and Charley (Thomas Padden), his long-time songwriting collaborator and friend, is nowhere to be seen.

The story takes us back through the seventies and the sixties, and shows how optimism and zest for life gradually turned to jaded cynicism and unhappiness.

The play may be poor, but the performances are stellar. Frank, Mary, Charley and Frank's first wife Beth (Joanna Hickman) are all wonderful. The 1964 Gussie almost steals the show, and the musical talent is, as ever, jaw dropping. It's just a shame that they're in a musical that closed in 1981 after only 16 performances on Broadway. You can quite see why.