



## **Burgess Hill Girls: Come From Away - The Spirit of Collaboration and Shared Storytelling**

As an NSTA Representative, I had the distinct pleasure of attending the school production of *Come From Away* at Burgess Hill School for Girls on Thursday 12th February 2026. Under the expert guidance of Head of Drama Emma Cassim, the creative vision of Choreographer Beth Galvin and the musical direction of David Black, this high energy folk rock musical was nothing short of extraordinary. This was a company that truly embodied the spirit of collaboration and shared storytelling, and this performance radiated that in every moment.

*Come From Away* tells the remarkable true story of 7,000 airline passengers who were unexpectedly grounded in the small town of Gander, Newfoundland, following the events of 9/11. Through music, humour and heartfelt storytelling, the show celebrates kindness, compassion, and the power of community as strangers become lifelong friends. It is a story that resonates deeply with themes of connection and humanity, values that shine brilliantly in school theatre. The original Broadway production won a Tony for Best Direction of a Musical in 2017, and the West End production won multiple Olivier Awards in 2019, including Best New Musical.

From the moment I entered the venue, there was an immediate sense of anticipation and celebration. The open and inviting staging created a warm environment that welcomed the audience into the world of Gander. Soft pink lighting against the wooden crate style set evoked intimacy and versatility, while the visible orchestra enhanced the authentic folk atmosphere and reinforced the Celtic Newfoundland soundscape. The design choices fostered a strong sense of connection between performers, musicians and audience, perfectly aligning with the aim to unite pupils, teachers and schools through the arts.

As the first notes rang out and the cast took to the stage, the energy was electrifying. 'Welcome to the Rock' burst into life with precision and shared purpose, the company moving and breathing as one cohesive ensemble. The clarity of intention and collective focus immediately signalled a production rooted in trust and mutual support. It felt vibrant, celebratory and deeply engaging, a joyful reminder of the power of young people creating together. The strength of this production certainly lay in its exceptional ensemble, with every performer contributing meaningfully to the storytelling, but there are a few individual performances that cannot go unmentioned.

Violet delivered a performance as Diane that was strong, brave and beautifully poised, offering a thoughtful interpretation that resonated with sincerity throughout. From her first appearance she demonstrated a maturity beyond her years, grounding the character with emotional clarity and a genuine sense of empathy that allowed the audience to connect deeply with Diane's journey. There was a quiet confidence in her stage presence, allowing key moments to land with authenticity and warmth. Opposite Violet, the performer playing Nick demonstrated versatility and charm, navigating multiple roles with confidence and expressive clarity.

Kiya's Beverley was captivating and assured. Her performance of 'Me and the Sky' was delivered with conviction and musical confidence, holding the audience in rapt attention and conveying both strength and vulnerability with impressive maturity. Beyond the musical highlights of her performance, Kiya demonstrated thoughtful character work, grounding Beverley in truth and intention. Her physicality and focus contributed to a portrayal that felt fully realised, with clear choices that reflected a strong understanding of the character's experiences



and perspective.

Valerie's Bob was bold, dry, witty and wonderfully sharp - her comic timing was spot on. She commanded attention with subtlety and intelligence and contributed richly to the rhythm and balance of the ensemble. What stood out most was her ability to convey humour with intelligence and restraint, allowing the character's personality to shine through in an authentic and engaging way, with a delivery which brought a delightful edge to every scene in which she appeared.

As Janice, Bella conveyed youthful curiosity with honesty and warmth, while Zoe's Beulah was characterised with authority and nuance, adding texture and credibility to the narrative. Sophie's Bonnie radiated kindness and grounded presence and Lilia brought thoughtful character work that enriched the overall dynamic. Each performer championed the collective story, celebrating one another's contributions and elevating the production as a whole.

The wider company demonstrated outstanding unity, with seamless multi-roling that highlighted the versatility of the cast. The inclusion of young male performers from partner schools added further richness and reinforced the spirit of connection across educational communities. Their interactions felt genuine and collaborative and underscored the production's message of togetherness and shared purpose.

Beth Galvin's choreography embraced the signature movement style of the original musical, with dynamic chair based staging executed with precision and clarity. The fluid transitions and rhythmic movement showcased impressive ensemble discipline and focus. David Black's musical direction ensured a vibrant and cohesive sound, with voices blending beautifully and the band providing energetic and sensitive accompaniment. The music felt uplifting and celebratory and invited the audience fully into the emotional landscape of the story.

This production stood as a powerful celebration of what can be achieved when a school community comes together to create. It championed the importance of the arts in education and recognised the achievements of every participant while highlighting the transformative impact of theatre. The standing ovation earned by this talented cast was a heartfelt acknowledgement of a performance that connected deeply with its audience and exemplified ensemble work at its finest.

The Burgess Hill School for Girls production of *Come From Away* was a shining example of how school productions can celebrate creativity, connect communities, and champion young voices. The pupils boldly embraced this mature and emotionally layered production with remarkable assurance. Their age never limited the depth of their performances as they approached the material with focus and sensitivity and every performer brought a sense of physicality and stage presence that felt well beyond their years. This superb production reflected the joy of storytelling and the belief that meaningful artistic experiences begin in schools, truly embodying the idea that the spark starts at school. This was an inspiring and uplifting production that will remain a proud achievement for all involved and a wonderful reminder of the unifying power of the arts.

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