



Burgess Hill Girls: Come From Away - Pupils Soar with a Powerful and Poignant Production

As an NSTA representative, I had the pleasure of attending Burgess Hill School's production of *Come From Away* on Friday 13th February 2026. Under the assured direction of Ms Emma Cassim, with choreography by Ms Beth Gavin and musical direction by Mr David Black, the cast delivered a production that was bold in ambition, rich in charm, and full of heart. It was clear from the outset that this was a company committed not only to telling the story well, but to honouring its emotional depth and humanity.

Come From Away recounts the true story of 7,000 passengers unexpectedly diverted to the small town of Gander, Newfoundland, after US airspace closed on 11 September 2001 following the attack on the Twin Towers in New York. The original Broadway production won a Tony Award for Best Direction of a Musical in 2017, and the West End production went on to win multiple Olivier Awards in 2019, including Best New Musical. Burgess Hill Girls is the first school in Sussex to take on this intricate, fast-paced musical, and they approached it with remarkable confidence and skill. The scale and complexity of the piece demand precision, stamina and emotional maturity; this cast rose admirably to that challenge.

The experience began the moment the audience entered the space, greeted by exceptionally professional front-of-house staff. The auditorium felt both spacious and intimate, buzzing with anticipation from a warmly supportive audience. The towering trees framing the stage and the beautifully integrated onstage band immediately set the tone. Wood-panelled backdrops and two striking pillars evoked rural Newfoundland with care and authenticity, grounding the narrative firmly in its setting. The visual cohesion of the design created a strong sense of place, allowing the audience to be transported swiftly to Gander for the evening.

The one hundred-minute uninterrupted performance moved at an energetic pace, maintaining clarity and focus throughout. Opening with introductions to key characters, Jamie's portrayal of Claude – Gander's quirky mayor – was instantly engaging, his good-natured sparring with Garth (played with humour by Hadlee) establishing the show's lively rhythm. Maia gave an outstanding performance as Janice, the rookie reporter. Her Newfoundland accent was impressively consistent, and her comic timing impeccable. She guided the audience through the emotional landscape of Gander's response with warmth, sensitivity and charm, serving as a steady narrative thread as events unfolded.

Molly, as Diane, created a wonderfully awkward and endearing chemistry with Henry's gloriously geeky Nick; their blossoming romance was a clear audience favourite and developed with believable sincerity. Grace brought humour and heart to Bonnie, tenderly caring for the animals stranded in the plane holds and ensuring these moments carried both levity and genuine compassion. Luca's performance as Oz was lively and entertaining, capturing his character's dynamism with ease, while Hadlee and Jake formed a believable and compelling duo as the two Kevins, navigating the complexities of their characters with assurance. Valerie grounded the group with her warm, down-to-earth portrayal of Bob, contributing to the strong sense of ensemble cohesion.

A compelling actress who shone throughout, Lexi consistently drew attention in the right way in the role of Beverley. This was a standout performance, combining a convincing Texan drawl with powerful, gritty vocals and a commanding stage presence. In Beverley's solos, Lexi showcased an incredibly powerful singing voice,



particularly in her lower register, demonstrating both technical control and emotional depth. She was hugely expressive and effortlessly natural in her interactions with others, deploying considerable charisma when directly addressing the audience. She expertly conveyed a range of emotional states, balancing strength and vulnerability, and comically engaging us with her idealistic portrayal of Annette through her multi-rolling.

As Beulah, the teacher, Anni served as a key narrative presence at the opening of the play and brought us an engaging character imbued with heart, warmth and affectionate frustration towards some of those around her. She captured Beulah's pragmatic compassion beautifully, anchoring the early scenes with clarity and assurance. Anni also demonstrated a strong and clear vocal tone, which was showcased effectively throughout the ensemble pieces, contributing to the production's rich choral sound.

Another strong performance came from Sophie, who offered a moving portrayal of Hannah, navigating her character's emotional arc with notable maturity. She worked fluidly and confidently in her multi-role pieces as well as within the ensemble, and her character intentions were always clear. Sophie's commitment to the emotional resonance of Hannah could not be faulted; her performance was sincere and thoughtfully sustained, allowing the audience to connect deeply with her journey.

While individual actors shone in these roles, the production's greatest strength lay in its ensemble work. Some of the most delightful moments came from brief cameos – such as Henry's hilariously exaggerated "Professor de Passion" and Lexi's breathless excitement as Annette imagining a whirlwind romance. Every actor took on multiple roles, transitioning between characters with clarity and professionalism. Ms Beth Gavin's choreography ensured these shifts felt seamless, reinforcing the sense of a community pulling together in extraordinary circumstances. The physical storytelling was precise and purposeful, with movement used not only for visual impact but to support narrative flow and emotional momentum. No matter where one looked, small, vivid moments of Gander life were unfolding under the careful direction of Ms Emma Cassim, creating a layered and immersive theatrical experience.

The ensemble numbers in this production were glorious: seamless, fluid, skilful and utterly believable. '38 Planes (Reprise) / Somewhere in the Middle of Nowhere' was a particular highlight, a moment when the ensemble truly shone, supported by strong vocals from Beverley (Lexi). This climactic moment, when the first of the planes had flown back out from Gander to the USA, was emotionally uplifting and beautifully delivered. The sense of collective relief and quiet pride was palpable, and the company's unified performance made the impact all the more powerful.

Come From Away is an ambitious undertaking, and Burgess Hill Girls approached it with skill, warmth and genuine heart. The standing ovation at the end was richly deserved, reflecting both the quality of the performance and the emotional connection forged with the audience. This production will undoubtedly stay with both audience and cast for a long time – a truly impressive piece of ensemble theatre from a group of performers who clearly have bright futures ahead.

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