

STRIKING THE WRONG NOTE

Marianka Swain wanted more grit from *Made in Dagenham* at the Adelphi Theatre on November 5

Labour disputes have proved a fruitful West End topic, from *Billy Elliot* and *The Full Monty* to *The Pajama Game*, and this new addition is keen to follow in their picketed footsteps. It has strong creative pedigree, too, with a script from Richard Bean (*One Man, Two Guvvornors*), lyrics by Richard Thomas (*Jerry Springer: The Opera*) and

score from David Arnold (*Sherlock*), plus it's helmed by hotshot director Rupert Goold. And yet this homegrown musical is rather less than the sum of its celebrated parts.

It takes as its inspiration the female machinists at Ford's Dagenham plant who, in 1968, went on strike to protest the sexist, parsimonious decision to reclassify them as unskilled

workers. They courageously challenged male managers, union leaders and politicians in their demand for equal pay – a battle that rages on.

If that sounds earnest, fear not: *Made in Dagenham* is so eager to entertain, it veers into squawking pantomime. Bean's relentless one-liners neuter the conflict, with deprivation, struggle and sacrifice referenced rather than dramatised.

The antagonists, including music-hall clown Harold Wilson (Mark Hadfield), are all buffoonish caricatures: good for an easy laugh, but diminishing the strikers' achievement. This perky farce short-changes darker, emotionally engaging threads like campaigning Connie's (Isla Blair) illness or leader Rita's (Gemma Arterton) marital problems.

Arterton, though likeably gutsy, struggles to convincingly transform from

wallflower to rebel, and the company is called upon to help this inexperienced singer land musical climaxes. More impressive are Naomi Frederick's frustrated wife, Sophie Stanton's foul-mouthed factory worker and Sophie-Louise Dann's diva Barbara Castle.

Arnold's pleasant but utilitarian numbers stall the story, while Thomas's satirical lyrics, though enormous fun, are at odds with the source material. *Made in Dagenham* is most successful as pure pastiche, with Aletta Collins' feast of 1960s dance crazes – rock 'n' roll, mashed potato, twist, pony and Motown – and Bunny Christie's ingenious Airfix model set.

The only moment that truly moved was the actual strikers taking to the stage for a bashful bow. This broad, feel-good show locates their spirit, but not their soul. ●



Centre, Gemma Arterton and Adrian der Gregorian



The cast of *Made In Dagenham*

www.madeindagenhamthemusical.com