

NATIONAL OPERATIC AND DRAMATIC ASSOCIATION
LONDON REGION

Society ; Reading Operatic Society
Production ; Iolanthe
Date ; 18th February 2010
Venue ; Central Salvation Army Hall
Report by ; Jacquie Stedman

Thank you for the kind invitation to attend your latest production of 'Iolanthe'.

This is such a popular show with wonderful music so I was very pleased to be given the opportunity to see it again, but this time from a 'critical' point of view.

Knowing the situation with the Hexagon it was interesting to see how this new venue could be used to full advantage. Because of its use as a base for the Salvation Army it is rather large and, whilst perfectly suitable for its intended use, must have taken some thinking through regarding the best way to make it suitable for a theatrical production of this kind. In spite of having no wing space, there were two usable upstage entrances. This meant that character had to be maintained until players were through the entrance and out of sight of the audience. I am pleased to say this was carried through without exception. Bringing the Lords in from the back of and through the auditorium opened up the hall and had the added bonus of making the audience feel (temporarily at least) part of the action. The back wall was adorned with the Union Jack, which added a bit of colour, and reiterated the 'Englishness' of the production. The gobos on the side walls minimised the bareness and enhanced the staging - I particularly liked the clouds. The initial dry ice was effective, but there was no need for it to continue once the show was in progress.

I was also aware of the problems you had encountered with missed rehearsals due to the weather and other commitments. This meant that the decision was taken to stage a semi-concert version. In actual fact this worked extremely well. The Peers do stand around a lot anyway, and having them seated at the back of the stage did not detract from the ongoing action. The Fairies too had seats in front of the Peers which then left the stage free for the actual storytelling. So...this was much more than a concert, and for a G&S proved very satisfactory under all the circumstances.

The big advantage of having a small band (apart from the cost) is that all the words are heard and I was delighted to be able to hear every word of both the dialogue and the songs. Overall I thought the projection was superb. I quite understand that you felt there was no need for a conductor but there were a couple of occasions when the singers needed bringing in or keeping in time.

Costumes were very much in keeping with the tone of the production, and well thought out according to the characters wearing them. In particular the Fairies were not whimsical and their costumes reflected this. The headdresses/tiaras were beautifully made and the Fairy Queen's staff was most majestic.

The show opened well with a band of Fairies which sounded more like a herd of elephants, which is quite acceptable if your chosen Fairies are not of the sylph-like variety. In fact this generally gets a good laugh from the audience which sets the mood for the rest of the show. Your Fairies were all involved and sang well. The three ringleaders, Celia (Jenny Saunders), Leila (Katy Wallis) and Fleta (Ruth Richards) worked very well together generating lots of laughs and interest in their antics. In fact they were so animated at one point, they were in danger of upstaging the principals!!

Chorus - please remember that all arm movements should be the same, and executed at the same time. Please also check your jewellery before going on stage - there should only be jewellery that your character

would wear. Peers too should have checked their costumes before going on stage - some of the robes arms were not at the correct level - in fact one Peer had both his arms under his robe. It is a good idea to have a full length mirror available just outside the dressing rooms so that every person can check his/her costume to ensure that it fitted correctly and looks as it is supposed to.

I thought your casting for this show was generally very good. You had some strong principals who worked hard and with lots of energy in their particular roles.

I have already mentioned the three troublesome Fairies and the Fairy chorus, and they were all led by a formidable Fairy Queen (Jenny Gumbrell). She had good stage presence with excellent clear diction and tuneful singing. In fact she looked rather like the fairies of the Victorian era looked with such a wonderful costume. Her characterisation was very clearly defined (as were most of the principals) and she fluctuated between being motherly and commanding.

Caroline Gallagher carried the role of Iolanthe well. She looked right and sang well - she certainly did not look like Strephon's mother even though she showed all the motherly consideration one would expect. Strephon, played convincingly by Tom Gingell interacted well with all the ladies in the cast. He was rather in awe of the Fairy Queen, was devoted to his mother and loved Phyllis (Susannah Brooksbank) passionately. He managed to portray all these facets with ease and moved about the stage comfortably and with confidence. I thought he and Phyllis made a very believable couple (as much as anything is believable in G&S!). Phyllis was delightful - full of charm and sweetness with an excellent voice. She worked well with the other members of the cast and interacted well with all the Peers. Her jealousy when she mistook Strephon's mother for his lover was convincingly played.

The Lord Chancellor (Gareth Watkins) could have afforded to be a bit more OTT than he was. This is a part which can be played for laughs, so this was rather a missed opportunity. However the songs were well delivered and the part well acted.

Earl Tolloller (William Branston) and Earl Mountararat (Peter Kidson) made a very good double act, both having quite different personalities. They did, however, have a common interest in Phyllis, coupled with a genial rivalry. They also have some rousing songs which were very well done.

Private Willis (Andrew Few) is always the part which seems to steal the show. Although a small part it seems almost pivotal in its effect and this one was no exception. A very disciplined appearance was maintained at all times by Private Willis, although it wavered a bit when he was confronted by the Fairy Queen. There was also quite a bit of business from the three Fairies in 'In Vain you Plead', which, together with a large dose of patriotism, managed to convey quite a festive atmosphere.

One of the things I love about G&S shows is the extended and very rousing Finale to Act One - and this one was no exception. However, throughout this performance one had the impression that everyone was enjoying it immensely and giving it their all. The energy levels were high, the words secure, and the audience appreciative - what more could a director ask for.

I hope that this alternative venue proved worthwhile and that the production was successful both financially and artistically. I look forward to your production of 'Disco Inferno' which is at the other end of the theatrical spectrum completely

With kind regards

Jacquie Stedman
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