



Society : Maidenhead Operatic Society (MOS)
Production : The Hired Man
Date : Tuesday 24th May 2005
Venue : Norden Farm Centre for the Arts, Maidenhead
Report by : Kim Halliday, Regional Rep.
London Area 14

Report

I would like to begin as usual by thanking Maidenhead Operatic Society for inviting me to review their production. I had not seen 'The Hired Man' before, although I had heard much about it, and so I was looking forward to seeing something new. I was also interested to see how the society – renowned for its high standard light operatic productions – would tackle something a little out of the ordinary. And this was on its opening night, too...

TIM HARLING (John). I thought that Tim was perfectly cast as the central character of the piece and he handled his role superbly, both as wronged husband and bereaved father and husband, displaying a whole range of emotions as he dealt with the knocks of life. In particular, I felt he handled the scene when informed of his son *Harry's* death in combat with great compassion, and his anger during *What a Fool I've Been* was demonstrated well. I also thought he paired well with Kate as a 'couple' and sensitively appeared as the 'victim' of the love triangle. But his crowning moment has to be the finale, in which he stood steadfast and straight, and proud, communicating an amazing dignity throughout the closing number. Tim has a fine, powerful singing voice, which suited the score and maintained his Northern accent consistently. A good, solid performance.

KATE BRAXTON (Emily). It was obvious to see that Kate was an experienced actress, as she was extremely confident on stage and had a good stage presence. She also maintained a good accent whilst singing and acting, which is not always that easy to do when coping with the high notes! Her rapport both with Tim and Luke was interesting to watch, and she managed to keep the 'will they/won't they' tension between *Emily* and *Jackson* in Act One at just the right level for us to be drawn into their story. I thought Kate had a very pleasant singing voice, if a little on the quiet side, and she held some beautiful harmonies, both with *John* and *Jackson*, in particular the haunting *I Wouldn't Be the First*. I did wonder whether Kate could have acted a little more frail when dying from TB, as I wasn't that convinced during her 'death' scene, but that may have been down to the fact that she still looked incredibly young (see make up below). Nevertheless, this was another credible performance worthy of congratulation.

LUKE WESTON (Jackson). Luke appeared to be the most natural actor of the company, completely at ease with his accent and character, and carrying a remarkable stage presence and personality. He helped to maintain the romantic spark and apprehension in the relationship between *Jackson* and *Emily* and handled the role of the spurned lover with great sensitivity and open-ness. In fact, his 'musical theatre' delivery and stance put me in mind of a Geordie *Michael Ball*, such was the resonance in his singing voice (which regularly sent a shiver down my spine!). Luke also helped to maintain the tension during the wrestling scene, and coped well with the odd hiccup when things did not go exactly as planned (e.g. the 'real' cigarette that refused to light!). Another, strong, well-thought-out characterisation, Luke – well done!

BOB SPOONER (Isaac). Bob both looked and sounded the part of the brusque work-shy Northerner, *Isaac*, and his performance at times put me in the mind of a *Bernard Hill* character, although not quite a *Yosser Hughes* (although the facial hair did make him look similar!). The role called for a confident, experienced actor/singer and Bob didn't let the side down, as he brought *Isaac* to life. In particular, I thought he dealt with his character losing his leg during the war well, moving around the stage with crutches as if genuinely disabled (although it was a bit difficult to sit down 'elegantly' with a leg taped up behind you, wasn't it Bob?!). Bob also looked especially at ease when carried around the pub on the men's shoulders – not an easy job, unless you have a complete trust in those doing the carrying! Brilliant work, Bob – a very convincing performance!

RAY HIGGS (Seth). Ray was another good character actor, who was totally believable in his portrayal of the coal miner brother to *John* and *Isaac*. He kept his Northern accent going consistently and had a very good stage presence, conveying a good range of emotions as required by the script. In particular, I felt Ray handled the angry scenes during the Union meeting extremely convincingly and was equally sympathetic after the war, when returning as a pacifist. I also commend Ray for the expert way in which he brought his whippet on and off stage (it's not that easy to handle dogs AND remain in character at the same time – especially during such an emotional piece). Another fine performance, Ray – well done!

PETER HILL (Pennington). I thought Peter was suitably authoritative as the self-defined 'old gentleman-farmer' of the piece. *Pennington*, the father of *Jackson* was the farm owner who hired *John*, and although this was a smaller and mainly non-singing part, I thought Peter was well-cast, having a good command of the stage, and he maintained his accent well and most certainly looked the part of 'the boss'.

CATHY BROOKES (Sally). Although I thought Cathy may have been just a little to 'long in the tooth' to play 'younger' *Sally* in this smaller but equally important role, and her accent appeared to slip every now and again, I felt she was she was much more believable and convincing as the friend and confidante of *Emily* in Act Two where time had passed and she was perhaps playing nearer her own age. However, I thought the scene where *Emily* and *Sally* were discussing *Sally's* affection for *Jackson* was very well acted, culminating in the duet *Who Will You Marry, Then?*, which had some good harmonies and was very poignant. Well done, Cathy – this was generally a very convincing and again, sensitive performance.

ELEANOR KERSHAW (May). This was a good debut performance with MOS for Eleanor, and I thought that she managed to portray the qualities of feisty *May* extremely well. A quite, but attractive, singing voice (well mic'ed by the technical team), coupled with a natural command of the stage, meant that she paired well with Chris as *Harry* vocally. Eleanor was also quite capable of conveying the ups and downs of her character well. I hope to see more of you in the future, Eleanor!

CHRIS WEEKS (Harry). I have known Chris since he was 'knee high to a grasshopper' and every time I have seen him 'in action', he has improved and matured beyond his tender years ('Thanks for the inspiration, Dad!'). Seriously, though, I was extremely impressed with Chris's handling of his role tonight. He maintained a natural and believable Northern accent and gave us a good display of both brotherly/sisterly compassion in his scenes with *May*, plus steadfastness with his parents as he signed up as a soldier. Chris, you improve every time I see you and I think your Grandfather would have been proud!

PAUL SEDDON (Union Chairman). This was a rather bitty part, as Paul was required to be on stage intermittently, but I thought he was very convincing as the brash Union chief, showing off his experience by looking completely at home on the stage. I did think at first that his full beard and slight frame/draping costume made him look a bit like a Rabbi, but he deflected this view with his consistent Northern accent and mannerisms, both acting and singing his relevant lines in character. Well done, Paul!

CHRIS GRIFFITHS, MIKE SMITH & MIKE ROBINSON (Joe Sharp, Dan & Ted Blacklock). Although these were minor, supporting roles, each was handled very well. All three performers reacted well with the action around them and no one looked out of place, remaining in character throughout. And again, some good Northern accents were held well, so well done, guys!

BOB NICHOLSON & STUART SEBER (Recruiting Officer & Soldier). Again, although smaller roles, Bob and Stuart handled their characters well. **Bob** was on good, booming form as the Recruiting Officer and **Stuart** was equally impressive in *War Song*. Two good performances, chaps, with unfaltering accents!

JULIA HIGGS, JANE SAUNDERS, IAN CAMERON & ANDY ASKER (Hired Woman, Landlady, Vicar & Tom). Although these were small cameo roles, I thought that each was handled with professionalism and I didn't notice anyone 'out of their depth'. **Julia** was impressive as the 'Hired Woman', whilst **Jane** looked completely at home as the pub landlady (well done for an impressive solo!). **Andy** also gave us a good cameo performance as *Tom*, but the real scene-stealer was **Ian**, perfect as the slightly camp Scottish vicar! Wonderful!

GREIG EMMETT, THOMAS PFAN, KIT HOBSON & BRANDIS SAVIZON (1st, 2nd, 3rd & 4th Man). These minor parts were by no means insignificant, and were believably and credibly played. Well done for holding such good harmonies and in impressive accents as well, guys!

CHORUS OF HIRED MEN, FARMERS, MINERS, SOLDIERS, WIVES & WENCHES. Tonight's chorus appeared to be well-rehearsed and moved around the stage with purpose. There was some good choral singing and harmonies were easy to hear and well-held. I was also impressed by the mastering of Northern accents, which also came across in the singing – especially commendable considering the majority of those on stage were more used to singing light opera! There were also some good freezes held, when the action had moved temporarily to another area of the stage. Congratulations to the ladies and gentlemen of the chorus – good job well done

DIRECTION & CHOREOGRAPHY (Luke Weston). One thing that puzzled me about this production, was although it was good to hear some well-maintained 'Northern' accents, I did wonder why everyone appeared to be leaning towards strong Geordie, in the mode of *Auf Wiedersehen, Pet*, as opposed to the more likely Cumbrian accent, which doesn't 'sing' quite as much as Geordie and would certainly have been the local dialect. It's equally as easy an accent to master, and could, I think, have been quite easily achieved by the vocally talented cast, perhaps with a few lessons from a dialect coach/native to the area? On the direction side, though, this performance could not be faulted and Luke had done an impressive job with his well-cast ensemble of talented actors. And that was on top of playing one of the main characters himself! No mention was made in the programme of choreography, but it was obvious that some 'movement direction' had been applied as the cast moved around the stage with purpose, utilising all the space available. The powerful identical opening and closing scenes, with the cluster of men in the centre being gradually 'hired out' was very sensitively handled, bringing a lump to the throat of many an audience member at the end (myself included!). The repetition of this 'clustering' in the soldier's pre-war scene also added a dramatic effect. The wrestling scene between John and Jackson was extremely well-choreographed and realistic, which made all the difference and really drew the audience into the story, and the punches thrown (and received!) were perfectly timed and very convincing. Similarly, the pit scene, with the location of the trapped miners and their rescuers on opposite sides of the stage, was simple, yet effective and allowed the audience to use their imagination. The pace was slick, the action ebbed and flowed with just the right amount of emotion, and the cast were used to good effect to enhance the action around them. Brilliant job, Luke – especially for a debut outing as a MOS Director!

MUSICAL DIRECTION (Matt Richardson, conducted by Tim Cumper). Howard Goodall composed this music for a rather unusual assembly of instruments, which I was rather surprised to find worked together so absolutely perfectly! His music, based and modelled on the traditional English folk style and themes, was lyrical and unusual, and, most of all, enjoyable. Tim led a superbly sensitive performance, and the cast had obviously been very well drilled in their parts, both chorus and principals, giving most beautiful substance to Goodall's harmonies. And not only that, but everyone knew their words! I enjoyed this musical experience very much – it is so unusual to find such a polished performance on the opening night!

LIGHTING DESIGN (Andy Nicholson). Andy has such a talent for lighting a performance effectively, dramatically and sympathetically as appropriate, and tonight was no exception. There was a most effective use of the cyc to set mood/'temperature', and the stage is spacious enough to allow the use of the device of dimming the non-active side, using light to focus the audience's attention on the significant action. The use of red light and flashes during the war/trenches scene was well done (although I would have liked to see the flashes co-ordinated a little more closely with the sound of the artillery), and the sky-with-clouds effect on the cyc towards the end of the show was just perfect. Another successful performance, congratulations to Andy and his team.

SOUND DESIGN (Tom Barton). Initially, I thought it was rather brave to not mic the principals, but I think that with the rather slight size of the orchestra it worked well enough on the whole. Mic-ing *May* was most definitely a good move, but I would also like to have seen mics on the two main principals *Emily* and *John*, as their voices did not project as well, especially during their duets – it only needed for a mic on each to lift the voice a little and impart a little strength and projection. Otherwise this was a good sound score; the artillery FX worked very well (however the rain was perhaps a tad on the loud side). All in all, a good job.

SCENERY AND STAGE MANAGEMENT (Paul Graham & Karen Newton). The minimal staging of plain white cyc as backdrop and kitchen to one side, pub to the other, was simplistic but just what was called for in this particular production, allowing the action to claim the attention at all times. The addition of colourful bunting for the return to the Crossbridge Club in Act Two was simple yet effective and the block-built trench in the battle scene was all that was needed to set the mood. Because of the minimal set, scene changes were slick and allowed the action to move at a good pace. (And that old box camera was a gem of a prop!)

WARDROBE/COSTUMES (Jenny Harris & Teresa Stanton). This particular production on the whole called for drab clothing, typical of the subject matter class and era, and wardrobe had done a good job in kitting out the cast in a selection of flat caps, bonnets & shawls. There were also some 'specialist' costumes of army uniforms, and these all looked authentic. There were one or two jarring notes, sadly all involving *Emily*, I'm afraid: her wedding ring looked far too 'posh/expensive' for her station in life; her nails and hands looked rather too well manicured, soft and cared for a working class wife; and nylon tights came into view in Act One – surely knitted stockings would have been more appropriate? And I don't think *Emily* would have worn such high heels when she was supposedly 'older' in Act Two (it's these little attentions to detail which get noticed, sadly!). That said, this was an extremely good effort from the Wardrobe ladies, who had made sure that everyone appeared in character.

MAKE-UP AND HAIR (Ros Hazeldine, Joan Thomas & Zoe Wyse). I know that Ros and Joan are old hands at this, and I thought that generally, everyone appeared natural under the lights; hair also appeared to be appropriate for the setting, with most of the ladies' hairstyles being covered by bonnets and shawls. The men too looked in character, and I didn't notice any 'outrageously modern' hairstyles (apart from the soldier with the pony-tail... oh dear! That's a no-no!). If I have one criticism, though, it would be that the main characters, and in particular, *Emily* and *John*, didn't appear to have been 'aged up' during Act Two. I wondered whether the addition of some grey/white to *John*'s temples would have worked better, and also whether some shadows/bags could have been put under *Emily*'s eyes to indicate a 'work-worn' mother dying of TB (she looked more like *May*'s sister than her mother, which rather spoilt the effect). Similarly, *Isaac*'s beard could have been quickly 'greyed-up' to indicate the passing of time. That aside, though, everything else appeared in order, so well done, gang, for your efforts tonight!

PROGRAMME (Rosemary & Derek Roberts). I must say, I was extremely impressed with tonight's programme, which was a professionally-printed brochure. The sepia image on the front cover depicted the subject matter well and the clear black text on matte white quality paper gave the programme a high-quality feel. The cast photographs were of studio quality and there were some interesting cast resumés. It was also nice to see photos of the authors included on the front inside cover, as well as photographs of the cast during rehearsals. The synopsis of the plot was easy to follow and a nice touch was the inclusion of background history, together with some old photographs of miners and soldiers of the period. I also liked the faded photograph on the middle pages, which accompanied the list of scenes and songs. Advertising was also minimal and discreet. And finally... many thanks for including the information piece on NODA. I would definitely recommend you submit this programme to the London Area Councillor for inclusion in the NODA programme competition!

FRONT OF HOUSE (Aif Bramley & Friends). As usual, a warm welcome awaited me upon arrival, and I was treated to a drink in the interval. Most appreciated!

And last but not least, I couldn't end this report without mentioning **Jenny** the whippet, who behaved herself immaculately on stage in her debut performance! What a natural – a star in the making! Can she be fitted into 'Princess Ida' in November, perhaps?... OK, may be not!

So, to sum up: congratulations to everyone involved in this extremely well thought-out and very moving production, almost perfect on its opening night, and I look forward to seeing you all again soon!

Kim Halliday