



Society : Sunningdale Savoy Chorus
Production : **ORPHEUS IN THE UNDERWORLD**
Date : Saturday 27th July 2013
Venue : The Rose Theatre, St Mary's School, Ascot
Report by : Gordon Bird, NODA Representative, Area 14

Report

This was the last show under the name Sunningdale Savoy Chorus before the society changes to a new name, Spotlights Musical Theatre Group, in the autumn. I was called in to help assist in the direction on *Orpheus in the Underworld* in 1997 when the original director had to step down thus offering my first foray into musical direction. So, I was extremely pleased to be invited to watch Jacques Offenbach's operetta at the wonderful Rose Theatre on a warm Saturday evening.

SSC's production promised to be "a modern and funny take on 21st century life". So how successful were they? Well, I loved the show! I thought this was an imaginative, inventive, funny and topical and just on the right side of satire.

The two video screens that displayed newspaper headlines is not necessarily a novel idea but it certainly worked very well for this production – with many topical and appropriate headlines (with accompanying photos) being displayed in forms of newspaper headlines. I enjoyed the 21st century references of, for example, the mention of the book "fifty shades of grey" and "updating one's facebook status" before going to Hades. I liked the idea of the opening with a chorus of public opinion, being diluted to just one voice but with a chorus of disapproving tuts and shaking of heads. The hot air balloon basket, piloted by Icarus, was a unique idea that worked superbly. It is one of the shows that you have to see more than once, as there was so much going on (and being said) that you really needed a pause button to take it all in!

Overall, it was clear that both audience and cast had a wonderful fun evening and I enjoyed every moment!

SALLY SMITH (Eurydice)

The part of Eurydice was cast to Sally, who was a little older than my idea of the character. However, the script was superbly adapted so that this made sense, and Sally produced a notable character performance. Her frustration and boredom at the beginning of act three was particularly impressive. I have heard Sally sing before, during a rehearsal of *Annie Get Your Gun*, and I was impressed then by her wonderful singing and I was equally amazed with her performance of Eurydice, which is not an easy part to sing. I loved her very expressive facial mannerisms and her excellent reactions (particularly when Styx was trying to get his way). Sally produced a lovely, memorable performance.

DAVID EMERSON (Orpheus)

David provided a believable characterisation as Orpheus and delivered excellent diction when singing as well as speaking. I was exceptionally impressed on his expert handling of the violin playing. It was only that I saw the violinist playing in the orchestra otherwise I would have genuinely believed David was playing the instrument himself.

BARRINGTON WOODWARD-ROBERTS (Aristaeus/Pluto)

Barrington presented a lovely performance of the prince of darkness. Not your normal “baddie”, more mischievous and meddling that was again just right for the vision of this production. I loved the lamb on the shepherd’s bicycle basket and then amused when it became a hand puppet and then laughed out loud when the puppet sang! A lovely moment and handled (sorry about the pun) expertly. Barrington’s bounded around the stage with wonderful energy and commanded the stage with his excellent costumes.

NEIL JAMES (Jupiter)

Neil produced a wonderful character performance of Jupiter. The fly duet, with Eurydice, was outstanding. It was sung well but performed magnificently with both Neil and Sally’s facial expressions represented exactly the feelings of their characters! The comic timing was spot on.

HELEN MAFFRE (Public Opinion)

I loved the idea of having public opinion starting with a chorus, a cross section of public opinion and then fading down to one voice, that of Helen’s character. This was an inspired performance by Helen. Her character reminded me of a cross between Mrs Merton and Mary Whitehouse. It was perfectly performed with some wonderful moments of humour.

EMMA PRITCHARD (Venus)

LOUISE HUDSON (Diana)

Emma and Louise offered excellent characterisations of Venus and Diana respectively. Both sang wonderfully well. They looked relaxed throughout their performances. They certainly understood their roles and delivered them superbly.

ABI COMBER (Juno)

Although this was quite a small part it could have so easily have been overlooked or underplayed however I was suitably impressed by Abi’s interpretation of Juniper’s wife, Juno. She has wonderful facial expressions that said so many words!

BRUCE SINGLETON (Mercury)

This was yet another well developed character. Bruce certainly made an impression when he came on stage as Mercury wearing silver shorts, top and cap accompanied with a painted lightning bolt on his face.

CARA BENNEYWORTH (Cupid)

This was a lovely little characterisation played by Cara. There were some nice touches of humour to help define the character, with her opening appearance in act two with vomit down her front and then quickly changing to a tee-shirt with an appropriate slogan! He sung her part very well, with wonderful clarity.

WARWICK GRIGG (Styx)

A part that certainly helped with an outrageous costume – complete with basque and stockings. Well done to Warwick who was greeted with wild laughter on his first appearance. His characterisation was spot on, perfectly creepy without going over the top.

THE BACCHANTE SISTERS (VALERIE RYALLS, CHRISTINE TOOK, LOUISE HUDSON & EMMA PRITCHARD)

I loved the idea of the “Bacchante Sisters”, an all female singing group that helped Eurydice escape Hades. Each of the “sisters” had unique characters and performed superbly in the song *Covered in Shame* with Eurydice. Indeed their costumes certainly were appropriate for Hades “love shack”. In the last scene they interacted exceptionally well with Bacchus, without taking attention away from the action and dialogue.

ENSEMBLE

This was a fine ensemble work by the chorus. There were distinctive characters and some of them played some of the more minor roles which helped the production. The make chorus as pupils were simply excellent, some lovely individual characters, catching the characters straight away with skipping on. Movement, entrances and exits were well thought out and very well executed.

DANCERS (The Lorna Timms School of Dancing)

The four dancers (un-named in the programme so my apologies for no names being credited here) performed the infernal gallop (or, more commonly known as the can-can) superbly. Their dancing skills were plain to see and they seemed to hit all their marks. I was, however a little disappointed. Given the expansive production I was expecting a little more – maybe a few more dancers? I am sure more were planned but maybe because of holidays and other commitments it was impossible to have more than these four dancers, and although they performed it exceptionally well, I just felt they needed a few more.

Director (JOHN WOODWARD-ROBERTS)

John produced a truly memorable show. From the opening chorus of public opinion to the closing encore of the infernal gallop, the show had tremendous pace, invention and delicious comic moments. I liked everything about this production – the costumes, the set (having the orchestra on stage worked very well indeed), the hot air balloon. Yes, some of the risqué moments could have been seen as awkward but they were handled sensitively and was always more “carry on” or seaside postcard humour than offensive vulgarity. The movement around stage was expertly handled, entrances and exits clearly defined and executed and the production vision was clearly embraced by all.

Musical Director (GEOFFREY HORTON)

There were some very strong and competent singers and Geoffrey ensured that everyone performed to a high level. The balance between the orchestra and cast was wonderful, could hear every word that was sung but heard the lovely orchestration too. A nice touch with orchestra wearing devil horns for act three. It was lovely to see the orchestra on on stage. I thought being so predominately positioned it would be a distraction, but far from it as they merged into the background and became part of the production.

Choreographer (MELISSA TIMMS)

There were some lovely dance sections, I particularly enjoyed the minuet and of course the infamy gallop was traditional but with some slight interesting adjustments that made it a little unique as well as enjoyable. I have commented that I would have liked to have seen a larger casting of the dancers but can understand the restrictions and although I was disappointed, it did not diminish the overall performance.

Stage management (JULIA LAWSON)

The production was smoothly managed without any noticeable hitches. Scene changes were quick and efficient. Stage props were competently set and struck.

Set Design

The simple but effective set consisted of a decorated floor painted white with wheat motifs, two steps up stage centre, adorned by two Greek columns and the orchestra positioned up stage left. Two large video screens were positioned on the auditorium walls, one on the right and one opposite on the left wall. These were resourcefully used to present amusing newspaper headlines throughout the show. Along the raised platform were short flats at the back that had painted wheat in act one but swapped round to reveal clouds for act two. Each of the three locations (earth, heaven and hell) were adequately referenced, so we knew exactly where we were. The tabs were introduced to add variety (and help scene changes). The set design and construction team can be applauded in presenting a simple effective set.

Technical

The technical aspects of lighting, sound and projection were not split out in the programme so I was unable to comment on any one or set of individuals, however, I felt the standard of this production is one that you can all be proud of.

The **LIGHTING** plot was interesting (using a range of colours to denote different locations of earth, heaven and hell) and all the cues seemed to be on time. The **SOUND** was finely tuned producing a wonderful balance between the superb orchestra and the mic'd performers. There did seem to be an issue with one mic pack (that effected two performers, CUPID in the first half and one of the male performers in second half) but this was a very small niggle rather a distraction to the overall quality of the performance.

The **PROJECTION** produced two synchronised displays of newspaper headlines of the various antics. They were of excellent quality that they could be seen and read clearly. They were at intervals sufficient as to be informative and not intrusive. This was a lovely idea and one that helped formulate our "public opinion" on the various antics.

Wardrobe (Co-ordinated by MARILYN LANSEY)

Marilyn produced some very good costumes that complimented the production and the overall artist vision of the show. I loved the way that the devil's helpers to accompany Eurydice to Hades were dressed all in black suits/ties with red face masks. The "young" pupils, wearing short grey trousers and appropriate school jackets, was wonderful. Praise should be given for the effective fly costume, cat girl costume and over the top (but appropriate) outfit for Styx. I also liked the idea of the slogans of public opinion following through to some of the Goddesses tee-shirts.

Properties (HELEN MAFFRE)

All the properties seemed appropriate to the show and everyone appeared to be in place and, where necessary, was used.

Makeup (LINDA PEACOCK & JAN CHISLETT)

I liked the idea of the "dead" in Hades having white face paint. Not so much that it looked ghoulish but just enough to give a representation of the underworld. Makeup to Styx in particular was very effectively applied. The designs for the characters like Mercury (with a bolt of lightning across his face)

(5)

was equally well designed and applied although it did start to disappear as the show wore on owing to perspiration.

Front of house

A busy front of house seemed to cope with a large audience. A surprisingly well stocked bar offered reasonably priced refreshment that was most welcome. The front of house were friendly without being too familiar.

This was my first visit to the Rose theatre to watch Sunningdale Savoy Chorus and thoroughly enjoyed the performance. It was a wonderful production on an impressive stage with a director who has an eye for detail. I look forward to watching the next production, albeit under the society's new name. Thank you once again for the invitation and making my partner and I so welcome.

A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to read 'Gordon Bird', written in a cursive style.

Gordon Bird
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