



Society : Hounslow Light Opera Company
Production : The Zoo
Date : Saturday March 10th, 2018
Venue : St. Mary's Church Community Hall
Report by : Des Wilby – Regional Representative (District 3)

Show Report

It was a pleasure to have returned to visit HLOC and enjoy an afternoon's entertainment at St. Mary's Church Community Hall. Thanks to Laurie Coombs for arranging my ticket and to Bobbie McNulty for the quick chat on arrival. With no stage, or obvious set, this was clearly going to be a performance that relied on quality rather than any other distractions...

The program was divided into two parts with Act 1 being 'The Journey to the Zoo' which comprised of a selection of animal-related songs. Attention to detail was evident with all those performing wearing dark trousers - women with red scarves and men with red ties. It was a pity that there were only two men in the choir as they were often overshadowed by the twelve female members. Unfortunately, like many other societies, I understand that HLOS is having difficulty in attracting men – something I hope can be resolved for future shows. Despite this, the high standard of choral singing was evident and having a conductor (Isabella Stochetti) to direct was clearly beneficial.

I enjoyed the humour of 'Poisoning Pigeons in the Park' (Tony Cotterill) and the encouraged audience participation in 'The Hippopotamus Song' (Paul Huggins). The stand-out performance from Act 1 was most definitely Rachel White's version of 'Wild Horses' which was beautifully sung with real feeling and emotion.

Following the interval, the choir members returned but this time in everyday clothes. Apart from the two rows of chairs used in Act 1, which had been rearranged into a semi-circle, the only other piece of staging was a food stall sign. As soon as Act 2 began the bar was immediately raised with both increased pace and energy. The entire cast quickly 'hit their stride' and delivered a thoroughly enjoyable performance.

First staged in 1875, 'The Zoo' is a one-act comic operetta, with music by Arthur Sullivan, containing two subplots. In the first, an apothecary, Aesculapius Carboy (Tony Cotterill), attempts to kill himself over his love for Laetitia Grinder (Felicity Morgan) - a love not unrequited, but thwarted by her mother, Mrs Grinder (Andrea Wilkins). In the second, Tom Brown (Paul Huggins) woos the proprietor of a refreshment stall at the zoo, Eliza Smith (Johanna Chambers), a task that leads him to consume so many sweets (and some animal food) that he collapses. Naturally, all ends well. Tom Brown is revealed as the Duke of Islington in disguise, prompting him to propose marriage to Eliza and pay Mrs Grinder to let her daughter marry the apothecary.

It was immediately striking here that the directors (Gemma Martinez & Rachel White) had taken care to work with the 'crowd'. Each ensemble member had been given their own character resulting in a diverse, and realistic, scene that was maintained throughout the operetta. It was refreshing to see this version being set in current times and the use of mobile phones to text and take selfies was inspired.

The use of binoculars to bird watch and even an orange to eat were excellent examples of how to involve the entire cast in doing more than simply 'standing around'. I was very impressed that individual ensemble characters were maintained throughout and with the numerous 'side stories' on display. This was a definite case of 'more going on' than simply focusing on the principals...

Felicity Morgan made an excellent Laetitia Grinder and suited the role perfectly. Possessing a wonderful voice, a clear 'stage presence', which exuded both confidence and experience, Felicity delivered a very assured performance. I was pleased to have heard Felicity sing in Act 2 as this performance gave a true reflection of her extensive talent.

Tony Cotterill gave an impressive performance as Aeculapius Carboy, the desperate and devastated young man determined to end his life since he was not allowed to marry his true love - Laetitia. Tony worked well opposite Felicity and portrayed the role with not only a degree of belief but also with humour. Tony has a quality voice and provided some much-needed male vocals in a most enjoyable show.

Johanna Chambers didn't feature as a soloist in Act 1 which was a shame as she possesses a truly lovely voice. Quite simply Johanna shone here in the role of Eliza Smith and was a delight to watch perform. Johanna is extremely talented, and was ideally cast for this role. As such, I'd very much enjoy seeing Johanna in a principle role of a full-length show, where her acting and singing skills can be more widely admired.

Paul Higgins delivered a solid performance as Tom Brown, an ordinary man completely in love with Eliza. Each day, he'd visit the zoo, and purchases copious amounts of food from Eliza, simply to be near her. Paul added the required humour to this role and worked well with Johanna as the 'love struck' suitor.

Andrea Wilkins gave a robust performance as Mrs Grinder in this cameo role. Another excellent voice and effective use of both facial expression and body language. Andrea is someone who'd excel in a principal role and I look forward to seeing her perform in future shows.

Whilst I appreciate that a conductor is a necessity, to set the tempo and ensure correct entries by lead/ensemble members, I did find it slightly off-putting during 'The Zoo'. Given the small nature of the performance area it would have been preferable, from the audience's perspective, to have the conductor standing to one side. Not an ideal situation I admit but without a raised stage and 'pit' more suitable for those watching.

Congratulations to Co-Directors Gemma Martinez & Rachel White who'd obviously worked hard to put this production together. Whilst a few more men would have been preferable you can only work with what's available – well done!

Lee Dewsnap (Musical Director) was responsible for playing all the accompanying music via a keyboard, carefully following Isabella's instructions and ensuring both worked smoothly together. The quality of singing was evident which comes from strong direction during rehearsals.

I was most definitely impressed with this performance of 'The Zoo' and with the talented cast assembled. Regrettably, Gilbert & Sullivan productions are becoming less frequent nowadays and I look forward to HLOS' version of Ruddigore, in special memory of Peter King, this Autumn. Indeed, I hope to see some of those performing here fill principal roles in that production!

Des Wilby
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