

Society : Julian Light Operatic Society
Production : Ruddigore
Date : October 18th 2024
Venue : Questors Theatre, Ealing
District : District 2.

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[Show Report](#)

It is not often these days that Gilbert and Sullivan operettas are performed, so it was a pleasure to accept an invitation to see this production of “Ruddigore”, performed by JLOS. It is so pleasing to see that these operettas are in the safe hands of such a society, not just serving up the usual, traditional fare, but invigorating the original with new life and careful thought on how to bring this medium into the twenty-first century.

The general set-up in the theatre was to have the orchestra in front of the stage on a lower level but still visible, rather than be buried in the traditional pit. This worked well, as did the size: eleven players, which gave a more intimate feel to the work, and suited beautifully the number of singers on stage, and the venue. These players maintained an excellent balance from the first note of the overture and fulfilled the requirements of the clever orchestration.

I liked the idea of the lighting cue to start everything off, and enjoyed the business of the waiter during the overture: these were originally played, not just as an indication of what you were about to hear, but to cover late audience members and quieten down the general chatter – unnecessary today!

The production used modern dress in general, rather than the traditional, and this worked very well, and aligned with the producer’s vision.

The opening women’s chorus of eleven singers made a great impression on me: I cannot tell you how enchanted I was by how pretty (and I’ve tried to think of a better word) the sound was: there was a perfect blend of voices, with no-one overpowering the sound, and with crystal-clear diction. Dame Hannah (Judith Thei) showed a good vocal range with some rich lower notes, telling the story with the backing of the women’s chorus. Rose (Gina Carmello) was very sure in her character, showing a clear emotional rise and fall through her singing and dialogue. She has exactly the right voice for G&S: a pretty, effortless sound with clear diction.

Robin (Philip W. Errington) sang with a light baritone – just right for the part - and blended perfectly in the duet with Rose. He was another good storyteller in his characterisation and performance. I enjoyed the business from Richard (Tom Dalton) at his entrance, with his modern, up-to-date “skibbidy rizla” voice and a true rhythm. The two brothers were excellent foils for each other, and the dialogue between them was so enjoyable. The “patter” song came over as very clearly. With the juxtaposition of his and her dialogue, where his was bang up-to-date, and hers was the original WS Gilbert, I personally thought worked brilliantly, although I did wonder if it might have gone over the heads of some of the audience, but the again I expect most of them were familiar with the story, and so could self-translate. His light tenor voice was perfectly suited to the role, and again there was a lovely blend in Rose and Richard’s duet. I enjoyed the “barrister/barista” joke!

The three voices in the trio kept it light and frothy: just what this number needs, with no one trying to out-do the others. Margaret (Katie Paterson) had a full mezzo tone with good use of light and shade to put over her character. The chorus also showed good musicality and drama to round out their roles. They sang together cohesively as one unit.

Sir Despard (Paul Clarke) fully got to grips with the “bad Baron” character and commanded the stage in his song with the chorus I thoroughly enjoyed the updated dialogue, with references to modern

crimes: food banks/pensioners pay/fake news/an heir and a spare. The whole company “came over the footlights” very well, and I thought the plotting of the scenery and furniture was slick and seamless, although you should remember to leave a gap for the principals to enter! There was a lovely blend and balance of voices in the unaccompanied sextet: everyone could be heard clearly. I would have liked a little more vocal reaction from those on stage to Sir Despard’s news about his brother. The chorus diction was a little lost in the Act I finale, and their movement didn’t quite work for me.

The opening duet of Act II was lovely and tuneful, with Adam (Alan Whitworth) displaying a wonderful R2D2 golden suit! Zorah’s (Sally Avery) sang a beautiful, poignant solo, which drew my attention to the fact that all the principals had voices with different timbres/tone, but this added to the individuality of their roles and enhanced their characterisation. However, it in no way affected their ability to blend seamlessly when singing with each other.

There was a moment when the chorus entered in silence, rather than on the music, which would have made for better continuity. I liked the staging of a tearful Rose’s song with the chorus. The appearance of Sir Roderic (Stephen Roe) and the ghosts of previous barons was very well played, with another rich-voiced actor holding the stage. The comedy of Act II was very well directed and managed, although I felt that the ghosts could have been a little more menacing. I realise that the director would not want to stray into the realms of pantomime... The men’s chorus sang well, producing a rich sound, but needed to be more brutal on the “Ha-Ha!”, without being melodramatically “over-the-top”. The “Brentford-Basingstoke” business was nicely played! Be careful that backstage don’t get too enthusiastic with the haze...

All the numbers running towards the finale gave the principals the opportunity to match with different voices: yet more examples of a wide variety of different blends that gave some of them the chance to bring out the pathos as a foil against the comedy. At all times, no matter whether in a patter song or a slower number, duet or trio, their diction was always clear.

The singing in the finale was glorious (I thought the telephone running gag was great) and I was impressed that the orchestra, although not in a pit, was always unobtrusive under the outstanding guidance of James Naylor, who also brought out the best from the singers, both principals and chorus.

It was obvious that the success of this production was the combined efforts of many talents; not just of those on stage, but of those behind the scenes: the set design by Martin Jarvis and his crew; the lighting design by Nicola Maddox, undertaken by Ben Pereira; the costumes from Sally Avery, Helen Gargan and Liliias Lewis, with support from Questors; the running of the week by the stage manager, Joshua Cole-Brown and his crew.

I very much like the design of the programme: it’s exactly what a programme should be: it contains exactly the right amount of information need to enhance the enjoyment of the evening, and the small format means it fits in your pocket, but is clearly legible. Thanks for this to Alan Whitworth.

Jessica Dalton can be proud of this production and of her concept: it hangs together with no jarring, awkward moments where the revisions feel forced, and shows that Gilbert and Sullivan can be enjoyed by all in this century.

Thank you to the front-of-house personnel who made me so welcome.

Tom Rainbow.