

IOLANTHE – W.S.Gilbert and A.Sullivan

W.S.Gilbert's satirical plots are topsy-turvy as Sir Arthur Sullivan once remarked ruefully, and Iolanthe's is a prime example. In a nutshell, the House of Lords, the Peerage no less, finds itself on a sticky wicket when faced with the superior spin of Fairyland and are completely bowled out.

Someone said, "The theatre is not a disconnected entertainment, but the sound and ring of the people." Certainly Woodley Players Theatre Company found opportunity to poke fun at the ruling classes, and references to second home expenses and Fred Goodwin's pension went down well with the audience.

Kathryn and the wardrobe team are to be congratulated on a visually exciting stage presentation and a distinct difference was made between Arcadia in the first act and Westminster in the second. In Arcadia fairies are dressed in delightful soft shades and carry what appear to be fibre optic wands, while the fairy queen makes her imposing entrance in a bronze and gold crinoline type gown with an awe inspiring wig and a staff of authority, establishing just who was boss in this fairy land. Stephan as a country swain had a simple but dignified rural outfit. No boorish peasant was this, and Phyllis a simple knee length blue dress unadorned in any way. The Peers of the realm on the other hand processed in with great hauteur looking magnificent in full regalia and striking a contrast to the rural scene that preceded.

In the second act we are more firmly fixed in the 1920s. Sergeant Willis, guardsman on duty at his sentry box with uniform, bearskin and rifle to the ready. Fairies have feather head bands reminiscent of the swinging 20s, Phyllis with a trendy dress of the period has donned long beads and long gloves, Stephan as a respectable leader of government has a suit, waistcoat and bow tie, and the Earls Mountararat and Tolloller have dress suits and top hats. (How they reminded me of Morecambe and Wise!) Who was responsible for the wigs? I saw no credit in the programme.

The technical teamwork wonders on this small stage. The wings are cramped and there is only one access, which is stage left. With a huge cast necessary for a G. & S. production, where do you put them all? Last year Philip introduced an extra stage jutting out into the auditorium for HMS Pinafore and this allowed all sorts of different access points. It was a joy to watch, but, understandably, it stretches the resources of the construction team and also cuts down the number of seats available for the audience. This time he opened access on both sides of the stage and provided a catwalk along the front that was used to good effect. I did wonder if it might have been used more, however, to relieve the crowding on stage particularly when fairies and peers were confronting one another. Good solid steps on the right for the peers to enter by and for Private Willis' sentry box later. Flats painted over suggesting green woodland with arch upstage left, and a green netting covered with flowers cleverly hid the flats for Westminster Hall. A tree trunk cut out centre stage added atmosphere, to be replaced by the lamppost for Act 2. The balustrade upstage was attractive and well made to allow Stephan to climb over. Scope is limited with this stage and it was good to see how every opportunity was taken to make best use of the space.

A smoke machine throwing forth mist where Iolanthe rises from the stream added mystery. Lighting was practical. Flashings towards the end of the first act accompanied the Fairy Queen's vengeful speech to the peers. It was a pity that Stephan was unlit stage left on his re-entry in Act 2. However, a blown bulb can happen in an instance.

The Fairy Queen had a powerful presence, which was used to good effect when confronting the Peers, but she also had a sense of fun when sending herself up with “I see no objection to stoutness in moderation.” Both Prunella and Katharine as Iolanthe had powerful singing voices and gave engaging performances, but perhaps a little more rapport between them was needed when Iolanthe was summoned back from exile to ‘their loving little band’.

I liked the confident manner in which Kate created Phyllis. This is a very demanding role and although it should be played by a younger actress it is very difficult to visualise how an inexperienced player could manage the irony, sarcasm and humour that is written into the part. Kate played with a light touch which was right because Gilbert’s words say it all. Richard looked good and created an attractive young Arcadian shepherd, and a reluctant statesman in the second half. He and Phyllis played together very convincingly and their duet on the catwalk was very pleasant.

Mike Nash embraced the role of Lord Chancellor wholeheartedly. His was a highly entertaining performance – at times stern wearing his judicial hat and at times weak and susceptible to the charms of the young ladies. Having been a lawyer himself briefly, Gilbert drew on his experience to play around with the ‘subtleties of the legal mind’, and Mike got every bit of humour out of his words, as he also did out of the Nightmare Song. His delivery of these challenging but extremely humorous lines was excellent.

This led into the delicious scene with the two Earls. In this the three actors worked as an ensemble. Their timing was exact, the wit was pointed and the dancing was a scream. Philip and John as Mountararat and Tolloller were a most entertaining double act. Experienced actors, they knew how to use their faces, bodies and voices to get every ounce of fun out of the dialogue especially when they were arguing over who should have Phyllis. The audience loved them.

All the fairies worked well together and it was particularly refreshing to see two younger actresses in the roles of Leila and Fieta. Annaliesa and Emma brought a breath of fresh air into these roles which were played enchantingly. They had good stage presences and show great promise as future actors with the company, as does Patrick Swain I hope he will be seen again. His egotistical disdain as a young peer was equal to that of his elders, and the way he used his crown coming well down over his forehead shows that he has a very good sense of humour!

Private Willis (Dave Matthews) was played as a humble regular soldier doing his bit for Queen and country. To remain immobile on stage for any length of time is not easy. It was played simply and effectively.

Congratulations to the Director, Musical Director and Choreographer for your painstaking work with the cast. This well dressed company did you much credit. Thank you.