

THE COTSWOLD SAVOYARDS

Princess Ida

The Playhouse, Cheltenham

November 23rd 2016

Director: Simon Lewis

MD: David Manifold

Choreographer: Lisa Crowhurst

This is the eighth collaboration from Gilbert and Sullivan and not as popular as *The Mikado* or *Pirates of Penzance*, but has some lovely music. As with most of their works it uses the stage to satirise topics of the day, in this instance feminism, the education of women and Darwin's Theory of Evolution. It tells the story of the heads of households who try to end rivalry by arranging the marriage of their respective offspring in infancy. Twenty years hence and the appointed day of their meeting has arrived, but Ida does not appear, as in the preceding years she has set up an all female university and has foresworn all men. Hilarion, her betrothed, decides with the help of two friends, to gain access to the university by disguising themselves as women and so claim his bride.

I had not had an opportunity to read my programme before the start of the show and so was rather taken aback when a female wizard appeared through the tabs and started to sing an announcement about 'safety' and 'mobile phones', it was very clever and alerted the audience to the fact that we had an unusual evening ahead of us. We then heard 'Harry Potter' music and the Wizard reappeared with a large book and started telling the story of Princess Ida. During the overture a young lady sat stage left reading a Prospectus for Castle Adamant University, suddenly an owl appeared through the tabs with a letter for her, after reading it she picked up her suitcase and a bird cage and disappeared through the tabs to Platform nine and three-quarters. Director Simon Lewis had the idea that the story had the potential to transfer from the all female University to Hogwarts School and he was right, there was so much going on throughout I cannot remember everything I saw.

When the show 'proper' started the tabs opened to reveal an impressive set of a castle with three doors across the back and stained glass window above the centre door. This remained throughout with additional dressing and changes in lighting to show the different locations. There was good attention to detail in the set dressing and props, with clever use of the flip chart. The show was well costumed, with all the wonderful wizards costumes, the red 'academic' robes and armour worn by King Gama's sons. The flowing red locks of Hilarion, Cyril and Florian added more humour, meant that they did not have to add wigs to enter Castle Adamant and were a contrast to the blonde bobs of Gama's sons. The lighting was well designed and operated. Choreographer Lisa Crowhurst had devised appropriate moves, which took into account the abilities of the cast, the small stage and the type of show. The fight choreography from Tom Jordan was excellent, again taking into account lack of space.

National Operatic and Dramatic Association

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The Musicians under the Baton of David Manifold were sympathetic to the singers never overpowering them. In the performance I saw there were a couple of times when musicians and singers were not together, but generally the music was well balanced. We were also delighted by the 'Stars Wars' trumpet solo from Steve Harper. The singing was generally of a high standard with good support from every chorus member who entered into the spirit of the show and took on board the importance of the role of the chorus. There were many fine solos and ensembles.

There were some excellent performances and I am sure many of the principals enjoyed the quirkiness of the production which freed them from the usual constraints of expectations of the roles. Brian Crosby was commanding as Hildebrand, father of Hilarion, he left the audience in no doubt as to what would happen if Ida failed to show up. Samuel Taunton obviously enjoyed himself as Hilarion, Ida's intended, in his curly red wig. He showed a good contrast to Ida's warrior brothers, being much gentler and fun loving. He sang well with excellent diction both on his own and with others, and I liked his character portrayal. The title role of Princess Ida is demanding vocally and requires someone with a strong voice. Cathy Keating had developed a strong autocratic character, totally in charge. Her first appearance set her important standing, which she maintained. I am sure she sang her songs beautifully but unfortunately I lost many of the words and it spoilt them for me. Paul Chesworth as Cyril, with his more controlled wig, gave a lovely performance as the most naive of the three friends, and surprised everyone with his 'Top Hat and Tails' routine. Robert Barton-Ancliffe as Florian proved to be the most sensible of the three friends, and there was a good rapport between him and Melissa. Sheila Ham as Melissa, daughter of Lady Blanche, was confident and gave a lovely rendition of 'Death to the Invader'. Anthony Jones was convincing as King Gama the 'disagreeable man' and you almost felt sorry for him when he had been treated so well that he had "nothing what-ever to grumble at". Bronwen Carless as Lady Blanche, opened the show well with her sung announcement and story telling. She sang well throughout and I particularly liked 'Now wouldn't you like to Rule the Roast' with Melissa; what wonderful facial expressions when she showed her disapproval of Ida being in charge. Fiona Gordon-Smith as Lady Psyche, worked well with Cyril and gave a lovely performance, although she was a little quiet at times, and turned into 'Wally' in the Battle. The other principal ladies Ada (Penny Lewis) and Chloe (Molly Masters) Sacharissa (Lisa Crowhurst), all sang and acted well and contributed well to the story. The appearance of Gama's sons, Arac (Malcolm Webb) Guron (Oliver Blake) and Scynthius (Simon Lewis) on children's hobby horses initially resulted in a great deal of laughter, which continued as they cavorted round the stage with risqué movements and brandishing their swords with glee, during the singing of 'We are Warriors Three'. Then later in 'This Helmet I suppose' they divested themselves of their armour in a cleverly devised 'striptease' aided by the girls. How they kept straight faces I do not know, they were brilliant.

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I found this a really enjoyable production but I am not sure if other members of the audience understood what was happening. I did hear one lady say 'I didn't know there were witches in Princess Ida'. As I said earlier there was so much happening I think I would need to see it more than once to see everything. Director Simon Lewis had certainly created a different, fun packed production, with much clever updating of lines, but still keeping true to the essence of the piece, and allowing us to enjoy the lovely score. It was obvious that both cast and audience enjoyed the production. Well done everyone.

Frankie Telford
Regional Representative. District 15.

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