

NODA review of Stewartby Amateur Operatic & Dramatic Society's production of Ruddigore
on Thursday 22nd November 2018 by Richard Fitt

Despite being brought up by a father who loved G & S and took me to see them at any and every opportunity I have to confess this one somehow escaped my attention. I therefore knew nothing about it but I noted in my pre show research that it was not received well by the critics upon its debut in 1887, and was subject to several rewrites before achieving a 288 performance run at the Savoy and then never performed again in the lifetime of either Gilbert or Sullivan. So full marks to Stewartby for bringing to life one of the rarely performed D'Oyly Carte operas.

One thing I always consistently admire about this group is their stage settings and particularly their scenery painting and this one by John and Hazel Daniels was particularly spectacular, with a first act set of boxset flats as a lovely Cornwall fishing village, the vibrance of colours and the 3D effects were absolutely excellent. The second half set of flats being the interior of Ruddigore Castle each one being a splendid recreation of Murgatroyd ancestors, the back wall and stage right (I'm assuming stage left was the same; I couldn't see from my seat – our fault not yours) - containing five extremely lifelike representations of the actors that appear as the ghosts. Superb attention to detail! With equally brilliantly vibrant lighting washes by Jack Lawrence and Richard Hull the stage was an absolute delight for the eyes. Costumes are of course a major part of any G&S and these were well sourced and very well chosen from Dress Circle Costumiers, which again just added to the splendidly colourful stage.

The orchestra under the usual excellent direction of MD Alana Thackray, were in top form and it was great to see some really talented youngsters amongst them. Also a lesson for all musical societies: no actors wearing mics, an orchestra between the actors and the audience and the volume levels were crystal clear! Well done to Pam Davies, Maggie Bullen, Naomi Morris, Jenny Brown, Simon Andrews, Susan Sims, Tessa Shepherd, Janet Butlin, Kate Young, Brian Caves and James Andrews. First class job guys!

Director Colin Jones certainly had fun with this production, with some wonderful original touches and modernising it by adding in lots of contemporary jokes about such diverse subjects as Anne Widdecombe's fashion, Burt Reynolds, Boaty McBoatface, Rick Stein, Trump, that dreadful Brexit and a Big Mac to name but a few. With such a large cast I have to admire his ability to get them to manoeuvre on such a small stage although choreography was wisely kept to basic simplicity. I know it's hard with such a large cast, but I wish there weren't quite so many straight lines during dialogue scenes. Loved the little cameo during the overture of the villager finding the volume too loud and putting on a pair of earmuffs! Proving you don't have to have lines to have stage presence. Very clever and very amusing!

The leads were all well cast, Andrew Hodges (Robin Oakapple) and Carol Urwin (Rose Maybud) taking us along at a cracking pace with both in fine voice. Not quite sure what happened in the

2nd act with the use of the script disguised as a diary which I'm afraid distracted a touch...? The excellent Charles Mills, whom I have seen many times was particularly good as Richard Dauntless a part he has played before and he certainly has a mastery of the Hornpipe. Peter Stephens was the faithful servant Old Adam Goodheart adding some interesting comedic variations to the choreography which kept me smiling. Peter Davis was very imposing as the absolute epitome of the Victorian landed gentleman, Sir Despard Murgatroyd, definitely my favourite character and the very experienced Linda Bowen reprised her role as Mad Margaret.

Other notables included David Crew as Sir Roderic Murgatroyd, Jessica Hallett and Sandra Buck as professional bridesmaids and a couple of excellent cameos by Colin Jones as Bruce and Chris Hodges as Wayne, friends of Robin.

Finally, the stage was lit up on many an occasion by a wonderfully enthusiastic and well drilled chorus in fine voice. Well done to Mike Cocke, John Epton, Richard Hardwick, Rob Jones, Mike Webster, Margaret Brown, Hazel Daniels, Jan Faulkner, Wendy Field, Molly Foster Juliet Jones, Carol Wallman, Jenny Walker, Elinor Ashby, Jenny Jackson, Margaret Magee, Pam Massey, Michael Webster, Susan Wells, Becky Wright, Shirley Hale, Jenny Hall, Hilary Hull and Doreen Hunter.

As I've said many a time, G&S is never about the script or the acting and this one was definitely one of their sillier stories, but it is of course all about the excellent music and the great operettas, and Stewartby certainly get that right in spades with all the classically familiar tempos and tongue twisters so beloved of G&S fans everywhere. A thoroughly entertaining evening which was, I noted, played to a very appreciative full house. And on that footnote, I would also like to add my thanks for accommodating our last minute change of plans. My wife, not the greatest of G&S fans said afterwards, 'Ooh, I quite enjoyed that!' That I can assure you is as high a praise as it gets!