

The Gondoliers

by Gilbert and Sullivan

16th November, 2023

Stewartby Amateur Operatic and Dramatic Society

at Stewartby Village Hall

director: Susan Hoath

musical director: Alana Thackray

producer: Jessica Hallett

Authors: Gilbert and Sullivan

Report

Author: Richard Fitt

A visit to its wonderful village hall complete with Romanesque pillars in what was once the capital of the world's biggest brickworks at Stewartby is an annual treat and bit of a rarity to be looked forward to. I'm going to see real quality singers filling the hall with their own voices to the accompaniment of a real old-fashioned orchestra, neither of which is going anywhere near any kind of electronic enhancement. Directed by Susan Hoath, this year it was Gilbert and Sullivan's *The Gondoliers*, which I haven't see for about 40 years, so a reacquaintance was long overdue.

Now, I mention the splendid village hall in all its homage to brick making because this year on arrival its foyer was decked out rather splendidly with Italian flags and posters several of which also decorated the auditorium setting the mood and atmosphere very well indeed.

Secondly, I was then given a rather splendid programme produced by Colin Jones set in A4 newspaper format, cleverly setting the scene in news article form, and dotted in (mostly) spoof adverts, illustrated with colour photos and set in the year 1954. The society had chosen that year in which to update the production in celebration of SAODS' first performance of *The Gondoliers*. Sadly, however, no mention of NODA within it means I am unable to enter this rather splendid 'rag' into the Poster and Programme competition. Shame, it might have done rather well!..?

The set by Stephen Hoath, Mike Cocke, members and friends and *Standing In The Wings* (whatever that is?) for the first act was an all-white background street café scene with the back wall depicting a superbly sketched postcard, set at a 45 degree angle with a drawing of St Mark's Square and complete with postmark and a handwritten two word note 'Benvenuti a Venezia.' (Welcome to Venice). The flats to the wings complimented it with various Venetian regalia and street signs which rounded it off nicely. To stage right on the apron was a table and chairs upon which various 'American tourists' were served by the café owner. Very 1950's! The second act set in the court of Baratania was a deeply rich set of red velvet drapes covering the back wall upon which hung the portraits of the two monarchs. This reverted back more to the Victorian era than the 1950's but was a very effective contrast – nice job as per usual!

The orchestra conducted by Musical Director Alana Thackray, was positioned in front of the stage on the flat floor with Naomi Morris and Anna Norton (Violin), Helen McKay (Flute/Piccolo), Berdel Efe Gulsen (Clarinet), Penny Norton (Oboe), Caroline Cartwright (Bassoon), Kate Young (Horn), Alan Grayer (Bass) and Edward Jones (Keyboard). Not to my untrained ear was a note out of place.

What a pleasure to hear a first-class orchestra. And what a wonderful arrangement Alana and Susan Hoath came up with, with the first number after the interval 'Of happiness the very pith,' by turning it into a 'Boy Band' Style number. Excellent and highly amusing!

Alana Thackray also served as prompt, but thankfully her services were only required once during this performance.

Costumes to match the period, jeans with red and white hooped shirts for the Gondoliers, some splendidly familiar style dresses from my mother's era, a totally over the top American tourist outfit in the first act and formal evening wear dinner trousers for the gondoliers complete with grey waistcoats in the second act set the scenes perfectly. Costumes were coordinated, supervised and supplied in some cases by Margaret Brown, assisted by Jenny Jackson.

Lighting by Richard Hull and Bubbles Lighting didn't really figure in my thinking whilst watching the production, which always means it must have been pretty faultless. Nice job!

Due to Arthur Sullivan's ambitions to write 'Grand Opera,' very well explained in the programme, the first act has twenty minutes of composition before a single spoken word is uttered, which allowed the entrance of all cast members in some style and the grand entrance of Giuseppe (Chris Hodges) and Marco (Gordon Hodges – loved his beatnik hairstyle!) was a particular standout moment as they entered from the rear of the hall kissing the hands of various ladies in the audience leaving us in no doubt as to which nationality they were! Lo adoro!!

With a cast of over thirty, excuse me if I don't review everybody but it was nice to see a good mixture of old familiar and new younger faces, showing that there is still an appetite for performing the G and S artform some 125 years on. The two 'kings' Chris and Gordon Hodges had voices to die for and powerful doesn't really describe it. I kept thinking they must be wearing mics to get that much volume. Totally wrong of course! Their two wives, Gianetta (Claire Moore) and Tessa (Katie Osborne) were excellent foils and very suitable for our two leading gondolier brothers. I was asked to take part in an audience participation competition as to which was the best couple. Let's just say my vote was mighty close between the pair of them.

Stephen Hoath as Don Alhambra brought a commanding presence and the rendition of 'There was a Time' sung by Tim Sell as Luiz with Casilda played by Jessica Hallett was a high-light moment. Newcomers Sam Hillyard (Antonio), Bryony Reynolds (Giulia) and Olivia Laurie (Emissary) brought a welcome breath of youthful air to the show, whilst the old stalwarts certainly didn't lose any of their enthusiasm for this specialist format. All in all, a thoroughly enjoyable evening's entertainment.

To be slightly critical for a moment and it's not really anything anybody could do much about, but I do wish the original designers of this splendid building had given it a somewhat larger stage, as with a cast this large the space becomes limited and the action a little static with little room for expanding any choreography, but that said when the stage was less crowded some of the ideas were excellently done such as the way the café worked serving customers, done with some panache by Andrew Hodges as café owner Enriquo and of course that wonderful 'Boy Band' number.

Thank you Susan Hoath and SAODS for reacquainting me with The Gondoliers which I last saw with my father, G&S being the only music he really ever liked.