

NODA Review of Stewartby Amateur Operatic and Dramatic Society's production of Princess Ida on Thursday 14th November 2024 – Review by Richard Fitt

Opening in 1884 at the Savoy Theatre, Princess Ida is one of Gilbert and Sullivan's lesser performed operettas and I don't think I've seen it since I was at school, so a brief refresher of the plot for those who, like me, need one. King Hildebrand awaits the arrival of King Gama, an unpleasant, rude man, with his daughter Ida, who was betrothed to his son Prince Hilarion when she was one year old, only to be somewhat annoyed when Gama arrives without her, stating that she has forsworn men and founded a university, for women only, based at Castle Adamant. Whilst Hildebrand holds Gama and his three soldier sons hostage, Hilarion sets off to woo Ida by love rather than war. Basically it's an early satirical comedy giving comment on women's liberation, which apparently was a regular topic for debate in the mid Victorian era. It's an oddity in that it's the only G&S in three acts and they are unevenly timed at half an hour, one hour and 25 minutes respectively.

On a production level Stewartby's version, directed by Gordon Hodges was very impressive indeed with a very well-rehearsed cast, an eye-catching set, a colourful array of costumes, some very complicated, perfectly performed hand choreography and a lively performance that never dropped the pace.

The set by Tim Sell, Mike Cocke, Jessica Hallett and Gordon Hodges under the Stage Management of David Simpson was particularly impressive. The first act, King Hildebrand's castle, was rich red, pleated drapes across the back wall with slanted flats to either side painted as the parts of Hildebrand's Castle. The second act, depicting Castle Adamant upped the ante with the same side flats but draped in different banners and the back wall with a stone wall and curtained alcove and a superb Romanesque stone pagoda with 'Patience is a Virtue' carved into the 'stone' below the roof. I was told they practically emptied the scenery store for this one. The attention to detail and the quality of the artist work that had gone into it certainly paid off in spades. Even the splendid Romanesque style brick village hall itself was well decorated with various medieval style banners, which offset the stage perfectly.

Lighting by Ben Whittle was flawless and as I always appreciate with Stewartby AOS, sound was excellent. What a pleasure in these days of over amplified stage mics to watch a society who still know how to project properly without them and can hold their own over the top of a full orchestra! A rarity in the 21st century! I did however struggle trying to follow some of the fast delivery of the libretto, but that may just be my aging ears.

The pitch perfect Orchestra under the direction of MD Alana Thackray was Naomi Morris (Violin), Pam Davies (Violin 2), Derek Davies (Viola), Helen McKay (Flute/Piccolo), Penny Norton (Oboe), Caroline Cartwright (Bassoon), Kate Young (French Horn), Danielle Broadbent (Cello), Alan Grayer (Double Bass) and Edward Jones (Keyboard). All very well adjusted to the acoustics of the hall.

Costumes were very well co-ordinated and sourced from Harlequin by Juliet Jones, which must have been a mammoth task with a cast of over thirty. I particularly liked the armour and the

amusing way the three soldiers were divested of it at the end of the show, which I was told was quite awkward with challenging fastening hampering proceedings.

The large cast on such a relatively small stage was a choreographer's nightmare but the choral numbers did manage some simple though effective movement throughout the show adding greatly to the entertainment. Excellent use of the space by such a large troupe.

The actors themselves were, I suspect, quite rightly cast more for their voices than for their character ages, but it did all work very well.

Peter Davis (Hildebrand) and Colin Jones (Gama) were excellent contrasting foils. Jessica Hallet as Ida has both a commanding stage presence and excellent operatic voice as demonstrated perfectly in 'I Built Upon A Rock' amongst others, and whose voice stood out above all others. Tim Sell (Prince Hilarion) was an excellent lead with a good command of the comedy within the libretto. And the three sons, Michael Webster (Arac), Mike Cocke (Guron) and Steve Bartlett (Scynthus), were hilarious in their facial expressions, enhanced by the way they wore those helmets, which I was told were extremely heavy. I loved their version of 'We Are Warriors Three'.

The ladies certainly held their own with some great numbers: Carol Urwin (Lady Psyche), Claire Moore (Melissa) and Olivia Laurie (Sacharissa) with 'Towards The Empyrean Heights,' whilst Linda Bowen gave us an excellent 'Come, Mighty Must'. Sam Hillyard (Florian) and Chris Hodges (Cyril) with Hilarion amused us with 'I Am A Maiden' and 'Gently, Gently'. All were supported by Liz Walsh (Chloe) and Sandra Buck (Ada) and an excellent chorus of sixteen.

I'd also make a special mention of the excellent and informative programme by Colin Jones, which was more than useful in following Gilbert and Sullivan's convoluted plot. Unfortunately, it doesn't conform with our Programme and Poster Competition rules, as I would love to have entered this cleverly put together guide to the show. I suggest he may like to visit the Noda website and look them up for next year; programmes this good should be recognised!

So well done to Gordon Hodges, his excellent cast and crew who had obviously put in the hard work to make this an excellent production that kept us smiling all the way through. My hat off to a society who goes out of its way to keep this artform alive and make my annual visit such enjoyable entertainment. My late father, a huge G&S fan, would have loved it!