



Society : Ruislip Operatic Society
Production : "Farndale Mikado"
Date : 30th September 2009
Venue : Winston Churchill Theatre
Report by : Tony Austin

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What a great way to start the NODA autumn season! The first night of ROS's production of "The Farndale Avenue Housing Estate Townswomen's Guild Operatic Society's Production of the Mikado" providing my introduction to the Farndale Avenue series of shows, with a performance achieving not only a demonstration of the homespun amateurism which (when not done deliberately) can be so embarrassing but also the expert acting and the professional plotting and drilling to ensure that the audience knows that it is all a tongue-in-cheek send-up. Not to mention spot-on – or perhaps spot-off – assistance from the technical side to achieve even more hilarity by carefully prepared "blunders" with curtains, lighting and props, in what is probably the only show where the "techies" are required to "time" a pause to get a laugh, a skill normally required only from onstage comedians.

Congratulations to Director and Choreographer SHIRLEY WOOTTON for catching so exactly the humour intended by the Farndale authors, using their madcap ideas to the full and building on them with her own inventions to suit ROS and her production, as well as for rehearsing everything so well that there was never any doubt that "forgotten" words and embarrassing pauses were in the script, and to CARL QUAIF (Movement Director and Additional Choreography) for ensuring that the chaos in the movements was always based on individual errors in remembering or performing choreography which might well have been designed for this adventurous and (dare I say it?) unusually young TWG Group; it never descended into true chaos and was therefore really funny.

I wondered why HEATHER DARBY, expert minder for my wife and myself, kept us chatting (charmingly and informatively) for so long in the foyer until the appearance there of HELEN BAILEY as Phoebe Reece, Grande Dame of the TWG, to welcome the audience, assisted by DAVID HAMPTON as the rather more nervous Reverend Mr Bishop. Truly a warm-up double-act, as they continued in the auditorium making us attempt community singing despite the only available accompaniment being a nursery-rhyme record (we were content to ignore the waiting orchestra). That their informal introduction to the situation in which the TWG was performing "The Mikado" was a huge success with the audience became even more evident when, as the second Act was about to start, Phoebe's appearance through the curtains produced a fantastic round of applause. And the Vicar, suddenly conquering his diffidence, then led a superbly effective Origami competition, possibly the highlight of the evening (and certainly so for SIMON WILSON, planted in the audience as the delighted winner after only 24 years devoted to Origami). Appearances in the performance of The Mikado as unlikely versions of Pooh-Bah (or was it Pooh Bear?) and Pitti-Sing produced some nice singing and a lot more inspired foolery from both actors: one couldn't ask for two better leads.

Enter MARGARET HOWE to play the part of "Band Leader" Gwynneth Featherstonehaugh, a role involving not just conducting the performance but requiring some very specific movements to help less confident singers (which they followed with their heads!) and later dialogue and body language during various disagreements with those on stage, all beautifully executed despite her having only very recently taken over the role. I hope that her experience when conducting a real TWG choir had in no way prepared for the mayhem around her. Her small orchestra started the overture (I presume deliberately) with some bars of less-than-subtle playing, but a classy oboe solo showed their true worth and they accompanied beautifully for the rest of the evening and played solo nicely when Pooh-Bah refused to repeat a verse previously sung unaccompanied. That the singing of both principals and chorus (when the script required them to co-ordinate with the orchestra) was performed to such a high standard, spoke well of the training by ROS MD GILLIAN BARRETT during the rehearsal period before she unfortunately had to relinquish the "Band Leader" role.

I shall ignore (as being too confusing) the TWG names given to the other Principals in the performance of *The Mikado*, although each of the G&S parts was played, by design, with the specific attributes of her TWG character, much to our delight. ZENA WIGRAM led as Nanki-Poo, obviously the young star of the society, with her professional attitude and abilities. Her dialogue was always beautifully clear and her reconstruction of the original when the character she was talking to did not appear was hilariously done. Her glorious ringing soprano gave a new meaning to the tenor songs and her physical reactions and facial expressions pointed the humour of her involvement in the errors of other performers and of her parts in the dance routines. SHEILA RAWLES, the more senior member playing Yum-Yum as of right, sang and spoke well and put across the apparently calm exterior and the raging ego it concealed with equal conviction, as well as the unwilling apology (after being bribed with the promise of the role of “Lolita” in the next production). JACKIE QUAIFF showed her character’s reluctance to be onstage at all, with no expression on her face, making no sense of Ko-Ko’s dialogue (spoken very clearly so we missed nothing) and putting over the complete nonsense of the allegedly improvised version of the Little List to score a great triumph, as well as managing to sing lovely harmonies with Yum-Yum and AMANDA JONES’s raunchy Peep-Bo, whose waggling hip was well deployed, especially when no one else on stage was moving. TINA WANE’s character, seemingly frozen of face in the first Act after her premature entrance as Katisha (though singing well), evidently enjoyed the lighter moments of the second Act. All fine performances, but put in the shade by ANGELA EVANS as a very Scottish Mikado, brilliantly unaware of the script and unable to take a prompt (“That sounds like one of my lines”), with more inventive rubbish in place of the words for her song and, during her dialogue, wonderful timing of the prolonged silences while the chorus on either side of her waited intently, producing hysterical responses from the audience, which she could extend at will with the smallest movement, change of expression, or sotto voce remark.

The twelve CHORUS LADIES, watching the SM for their signal to run downstage long after the first Act curtains had opened and frequently returning to the stage (mostly at the right time) threw themselves into their carefully set routines appropriate to a TWG Group and made it look as if the disrupting elements had happened without rehearsal and were avoided by chance – all while singing melodiously. I can’t list all the super individual contributions, but PAM BAILEY on her Zimmer Frame made much of being the chief disrupter, ALISON COE’s Hay Fever sufferer added another variation on that theme, ANDREA BRIGHT’s absolutely inappropriate tap dance across stage while the ensemble was singing was beautifully performed and hilarious, OLIVER SPINKS’s actions spoke louder than his words, particularly effectively when (assisted by the Vicar) he twice removed the wrong “body” from the stage and then prevented it from returning to its place (sorry to say, I didn’t identify the “right” body, whose collapse was perfectly done to attract our attention, nor the tree which made various amusing appearances), while KAREN LONGDEN spent the evening disrupting things from the orchestra pit and (it seemed) the interval too close to the sherry bottle.

Technical support was brilliant throughout, with Production Secretary LYNN JACKSON also responsible for the very TWG costumes including lovely sets for the chorus (assisted by HILARY HILL and COMPANY MEMBERS). Set (design: MALCOLM UNWIN) and Props (NOELLE BARRETT), each with reliance on constructors ALAN and GEOFF BAILEY and JOHN EDWARDS and with PETE WANE and OTHERS contributing to the artwork, both excelled in their artistic simplicity, which for this show I can also say about ANDREW BIRD’s fine and sensitive lighting. And the STAGE CREW under SM RICHARD KESSEL ensured that everything happened according to the script – which is probably very much more difficult than getting things right is for other shows.

I loved many other things about the show and this production including the miscellaneous umbrellas the chorus ladies carried for the opening number, which later appeared as the wheels of the train (some turning backwards) for the chorus “Comes a Train of Little Ladies”, the really pretty one-sided Pirate Boat for “Song of the Sea” (although surely that should mean their previous productions list should include “Pirates of Penzance” or at least “The Flying Dutchman”) and the Maypole trick.

Thanks to Front of House Manager LES DEARLOVE for the hospitality and to everyone involved in the massive enterprise as listed in the innovative and artistic programme, which should be submitted to NODA London along with your eye-catching poster to be considered for next year’s awards.