



Society : Ruislip Operatic Society (ROS)  
Production : Into the Woods  
Date : 5<sup>th</sup> October 2013  
Venue : Winston Churchill Theatre  
Report by : Tony Austin

## Report

Stephen Sondheim's take on the fairy stories from our childhoods doesn't get out among us as often as it should these days: problems over the lack of genuine chorus work with every character needing to put over words as a principal, difficulties over the staging which in professional productions have been addressed in various expensive ways, and the complications of the music are often cited as reasons. Happily, we can rely on ROS not to be put off by such challenges but to treat them as opportunities, and the result was the innovative and sparkling show they presented not in, but near, Ruislip Woods, with more than enough Coups de Theatre to satisfy discerning audiences.

Set Designer (as well as President and Chairman) **Malcolm Unwin** dealt with two of the problems at a stroke: movable forest trees of full height but of light construction which could be rearranged on stage to become different parts of the forest or moved aside for other scenes – operated by extra **Company Members** as anonymous wood sprites who could also be used to control the flocks of birds essential to the plot on occasions as well as assisting in other ways and joining in the singing and action when appropriate. And the result was so well achieved, with the birds artistically pleasing and the trees always erect and never obviously stamped on to keep them stationary in their new positions that I shall name and congratulate them first: **Maria Brennan, Susan Brown, William Cody, Richard Connolly, Tasha Ewing, Catherine Ford, Elizabeth Hampton, Deborah Maycraft, Susan Maycraft, Nazalia Priedon and Jackie Quaif**. And with the tree theme also used to decorate the forestages in ROS's usual fashion cleverly hiding the constructions behind them came the Coups, with a window suddenly opening high up on the left forestage for **Karen Stroud** as Cinderella's mother to deliver her clear lines and her daughter's lovely ballgown, with a later transformation into Rapunzel's Castle, while the right forestage provided the tree for the assault on and slaughter of the Giant. Congratulations to all concerned in the absolutely solid construction (**Alan Bailey, John Field, Keith Cochrane, Jeff Smith and Les Dearlove**), to **Society Members** for the Scenery Painting, and especially to those who wriggled unseen up the necessarily narrow access (including for the first time a concealed route around the Pros Arch – which I have been hoping would happen ever since *Little Shop of Horrors* and *A Funny Thing...*)!

Also making light of the complications, the whole **Company** sang with assurance the tricky lyrics and unusual rhythms of the music without any apparent view of Musical Director **Robert Wicks**, hidden with his accomplished 7-strong Band at the back of the stage, a tribute to his thorough training and rehearsal of them, while the normal position of the orchestra turned into a lower height stage extension, giving extra the space for artistic positioning of the cast on stage and ease of access via the auditorium to other parts of the woods, both well used in Director **Julia Rufey**'s finely fluid Production which ensured there were no delays or log-jams in the plethora of entrances and exits as the action switched between the various strands of the fairy tales before they all joined together.

Slight disappointments in Saturday evening's First Act: the interference to the amplified sounds, with hums and crackles and beginnings of instructions (was there a problem with **Denis Cater**'s sound system or outside interference?) and that the Act 1 Lighting (by **Dan Sagers** and **Jonathan York**) was often extremely dim in the wood (surely not necessary for this upbeat part of the fairy

tale) and that no spotlight was available for **Alan Bailey**, who (apparently undeterred) made many of his fine narrations in almost complete darkness.

To start at the end of the evening: the brief unexpected appearances of Snow White (**Esther Watkins**) and Sleeping Beauty (**Fleur Noriega-Constable**) raised a good laugh from the audience, while costumeless **Caroline Bronne-Shanbury** with only the glasses by which to identify her didn't seem to get a boo (except from me) for her fine scary work as the voice of the Giant. **Helen Sheppard-Bools** and **Oliver Spinks** deserved more recognition for their many entrances as Milky White and another cow (congratulations to the maker of their head, and to the extras who appeared as the closely-related royal white horses); a shame, but not their fault, that the items which Milky ate could be seen being passed above the cow's back rather than being kept lower and so disappearing as if by magic. The earlier disappearance (in the nicely economical skeleton cottage) into the stomach of the Wolf (**Matthew Ralph**, who suffered the worst of the audio interference) worked better, and the reappearance, together with the expulsion of **Janice Lim**'s really joyful Grandmother was a delight. **Ian Parrott**'s few lines as Cinderella's father were nicely pointed, while **Simon Wilson**'s Steward was a cinch for him with lines and reactions reminiscent of similar pantomime characters, although I have never seen him having to kill anyone in such a production. **Mike Fox**'s Mysterious Man was delightfully underplayed and after we discovered he was the Baker's father (and Not Completely Dead) his verse of *No More* (not shown in the programme) was beautifully delivered and utterly touching, and as I now realise essential to the fairly happy ending.

**Pam Bailey** was a perfect choice for Jack's mother, her instructions, admonitions and frustrations well put over and seeming to be completely natural. **Zena Wigram** as the Stepmother ranged easily from early disdainful spitefulness to Cinderella to the high camp of the slipper scene, waving triumphantly the bleeding severed toe and heel, while as her daughters **Vikki Giffen** and **Lucy Woodbridge** played up well with the cruel comedy of that and of their blindness. **Fran Hampson** made a lovely Rapunzel in her tower, seductively letting down her hair with different results and singing of her frustration, while **Paul Hunter** and **Matthew Ralph** (again) as the Princes had great fun sending up their Princely assumptions, with the *Agony* of their well-sung and acted first Act duet only eclipsed by the second Act version with both clearly pointing up the irony in the lyrics. And Matthew's later encounter with the Baker's Wife, brilliantly set and played to combine the urgency of shared passion with the humour of entangled legs took the story into unexpected places.

Surviving the Giant's depredations: **Andy Sonden**, a wandering troubadour rather than a wondering one (as the programme says), but certainly a wonderfully clever portrayer of not-very-intelligent young men, convincingly invested Jack with every possible juvenile emotion and puzzled reaction, and handled his dialogue and sang beautifully in character as a really *juvenile* lead; **Jess Rufey**, a true survivor as a Red Ridinghood with an eye to the main chance, proudly wearing her Wolf cape and quickly learning from every experience, sang Sondheim's words brilliantly and knew just how to point when sung or spoken with voice and body language; **Elise Allanson** as Cinderella making much of her ability to talk to birds, believably in two minds through all the shoe business in the woods (intensely comic as she played it for real), brilliant with the quick-fire *On the Steps of the Palace* and maturing through the second Act to welcome relationships and housework; and leading man **Kevin Murray**, superb as the serious-minded Baker on his seemingly impossible search, able to learn *It Takes Two* but happily not everything else, equally convincing in his quarrels with his wife and their tender moments and fantastic in his despair and the new resolve given by his father, leading to the very strongly sung and acted wonderful final scenes between the four survivors.

And the two, very different, leading ladies: **Anastasia Morton**, unrecognisable as, losing her magic powers, she turned from the apparently shrivelled old Witch with croaking voice into her glamorous younger self and became the most dominant person on stage showing amazing power and control in her Second Act numbers; and **Carole Anne Colford** as the Baker's Wife equally realistic as the concerned, and sometimes desperate, wife and later mother, and in her fascination for and later

romp with the Prince, with every word, glance and movement ringing true and singing like an angel, especially when coming forward as a spirit to her husband in the touchingly staged finale.

Congratulations also to all those unseen who helped to make the whole show such a pleasing occasion: Wardrobe Co-ordinator **Alison Coe** and her Team **Hilary Hill, Christine Unwin** and **Lindsey Alcock**, together with members supplying costumes or sourcing them from elsewhere for the wonderful look of the show; **Nazalia Priedon** for supervising make-up and hair (and **Angela Evans** for her special attention to The Baker); **Helen Bailey**, Mistress of the huge number and variety of props; Stage Director **Amanda Jones** and SM **Steve Stroud** for co-ordinating everything including the previously applauded tree-movers; and all others as mentioned in the programme.

One criticism I do have concerns the programme and the auditorium lighting, which seemed to have been dimmed to make us feel that we were cowering in the woods already and made the black upon grey programme pages extremely difficult to read – neither, I think, something likely to improve the mood of the audience for a show with an upbeat first Act which doesn't even start in the woods.

Congratulations to Director **Julia Rufey** and MD **Robert Wicks** and to all those who assisted them in producing such a great result with this complex show in a rehearsal period rather shorter than ROS usually has in the summer; and thanks to President **Barbara Johnson** and others Front of House, for the welcome and the supply of both information and hospitality to my wife and myself.

