



Society : Ruislip Operatic Society (ROS)  
Production : Pride and Prejudice  
Date : 29<sup>th</sup> November 2012  
Venue : Winston Churchill Theatre  
Report by : Tony Austin

## Report

What an incredible experience ROS have just been through! Presenting the World Premiere of this American musical with its composer and librettist over for the run to add to the excitement of the whole amazing enterprise. Just the sort of daring innovation by a NODA society which should have been trumpeted across the country, so what a shame that NODA's publishing arrangements failed at that crucial time and Director **Helen Bailey**'s cover story, scheduled for Amateur Stage publication, had to be re-formatted for email circulation and only reached me and other reps to send on to the societies in our respective Districts on the day of your opening night. A real pity, as the Director and her strong cast gave us a really impressive performance, certainly worth coming miles to see.

And what a huge investment ROS made in the enterprise, delighting us firstly with a superb, colourful and frequently changing array of period costumes carefully picked from a variety of sources and supervised by wardrobe mistresses **Anastasia Morton** (also to be congratulated as Chorus Mistress on the fine choral singing) and **Fran Hampson** with their **six assistants**, presumably kept busy with the many changes. Next a word for the Props Team of **Chris Unwin**, **Shirley Wootten**, **Gill Cochrane** and **Andrea Bright** and the huge collection of wonderful props they had assembled and I assume the elegant set dressings for the multifarious scenes including more pedestals of floral displays than I could count, with a special mention for the lady who tiptoed into the half-lit Longbourne Hallway during one of the scenes in the family room and carefully changed the floral arrangement for another which (at any rate from Row L) appeared identical to the first. The scenery, designed by **Alan Bailey** and constructed by him, **Les Dearlove** and **John Field** and painted by **Society Members**, was itself amazing, needing to change frequently from that family room, whose walls folded easily back into a little view of the outside of the house on the DSL forestage, with its own practical door and an impressive window giving a view of a stately garden (brilliant artwork by **Tim Leman**), to other locations, often merely cleverly indicated, but with a most impressive ballroom with huge and realistic marble pillars which, dressed superbly, should have received applause when it was revealed. The village square was dominated by a massive granite cross, there were stone seats and ornaments for the garden scenes, and I assume the delicate spinet was also home made. I take it that the cloths, an unobtrusive hallway backing and an OTT display of windows and drapery for Lady Catherine's home must have been hired, and I am sad that I cannot therefore nominate the scenery for the next NODA Scenic Award as the current conditions (laid down when it was given by a company probably doing straight plays with box sets) disqualify designs where any part is not home made. (I must see if that can be changed in future.) The fine period hairstyles and wigs, some of which needed to be changed between scenes, were supervised by **Angela Evans**, while make-up by **Maria Brennan** appeared unexceptionable.

Without any previous stage performance no one could tell beforehand how the scene changes would work, and Stage Director **Steve Stroud**, SM **Gary Hockham** and their **five-strong crew** could have done with more help during some difficult changes especially as so many pieces had to be moved individually, it being seemingly impractical to use trucks. Having been told of the scenic troubles of a new American musical which started at Leicester this autumn with full mechanised scenery, I sympathise with them, though they did often seem to forget that the family room needed

an armchair moved before it would fold away. I did observe that there was no reason to hurry some of the changes when the cast appeared after some further delay in different costumes and wigs.

MD **Robert Wicks** (also responsible for training the singers to a fine standard, and for putting together the music for the dances and possibly some of the other arrangements) and his orchestra played the music for the songs and dances (all sounding pretty and not out of key with the period) and proved adept at covering the scene changes, however long or short, with repeats fading when the next scene was ready, though I think the horn part will be reduced for future productions as it drowned rather than accompanying the lady singers, and a drummer who watched the conductor in the overture so he didn't get out of time on a tempo change and who could play more quietly in some other passages when accompanying singing or underscoring dialogue would be an advantage.

And so at last to the cast, where the **ensemble** appeared only occasionally but always contributed to the atmosphere and elegance in a variety of costumes as characters of all ages, sang well at the show's opening and closing with a number of clear but anonymous solo lines (even more anonymously from the Punch and Judy operator), and performed the period formation dances at the Assembly Ball with the appropriate amount of precision and those at Mr Bingley's Masked Ball with even more elegance. I had difficulty with various conversations and sung lines during the actual dances, not only because of the music but also from needing to find what part of the stage some words were coming from and then of the identity (especially behind the superb collection of masks) of the person speaking: easily cured by a close-up in a film but on stage needing pools of light rather than the generic lighting available even at a cost to amateurs. Stepping out for a few brief lines spoken or sung on other occasions, however, **Malcolm Unwin** and **Caroline Bronne-Shanbury** were distinguished figures as Sir William and Lady Lucas, **Oliver Spinks** got Colonel Fitzwilliam's disapproval over despite the spinet and **Mark Lamoon** made us understand Mr Wickham's grudge before disappearing, to return with his character de-blemished at the very end.

The Bennet family were introduced to us in their parents' charming duet *Five Daughters* with the girls singing delightfully as a chorus; they played well together in many scenes, taking an active interest or fading into the background as appropriate, but five of them was too many for me to identify which of the lines or intelligent reactions or the incidents of misbehavior at the Ball came from **Kirsty Turner** as Mary, **Alice Bailey** as Kitty or even **Vicky Fischbacher** as Lydia, although the last well showed her enjoyment in her rise in status over the others on her return from her elopement. Their other sisters were, of course, the leading ladies. **Alan Bailey** made a great Mr Bennet, getting all the humour from his dialogue and his reactions to his wife, believable in his tenderness to his daughters and singing as if the part had been written for him. And **Pam Bailey** related to him very well (hardly surprisingly), got over Mrs Bennet's empty-headed anxieties for her daughters attractively and with good variation, panicked delightfully and maintained her character through her fine dialogue and the best singing role I have seen her portray.

Other roles were strongly played: by **Esther Watkins** as Caroline Bingley, pointing her anti-Bennet remarks with vitriol in the hope of capturing Darcy, and apparently doing the same with her pen in Act 2; by **Angela Evans** as Lady Catherine, pitching her Grande Dame manner just right for us to be able to giggle at her eccentricities while still regarding them with horror, and singing her obviously witty number tunefully and with spirit (though regrettably the horn obscured some of the words); by **Susan Maycraft** as Charlotte, faithful friend and not a bit like Richard III as she feared in the nicely sung *In My Imagination*, accepting marriage to Mr Collins with fortitude both in song and as she read her own letter; and especially by **Peter O'Regan** as the dreadful Mr Collins, the Vicar from Hell (which is obviously where lots of the best songs come from), absolutely creepy when looking to pick a wife from among the Bennet girls, fastidiously perfect in his remaining dialogue, glorying in his self-importance and, in the absence of the male leads for a large chunk of the middle of the evening, left with more singing to do than anyone else, achieving tremendous heights in one number which scaled through successive vocal ranges and great comedy in another in

an exotic dance rhythm and, while not a great dancer, a super dance send-up in a third. I wonder whether he will ever find as perfect a role for his talents in any other musical.

**Carl Quair** presented a fine portrait of wealthy and cultured Mr Bingley, introducing the situation and other characters with clear dialogue as the Company gave him their *Welcome to the Neighbourhood* and leading the singing (and intelligent parlando) for the trio *It is a Truth*, which received a fine hand even though the ending of the music and their walking off as the lights faded seemed not to be designed to encourage applause, which so helps where a scene change is about to happen. As host to Jane and Elizabeth during Jane's illness and later at the Ball given for their benefit, he continued his charming way, although as he and Jane confessed their budding love to us (but not to each other) in the lovely and beautifully sung *Changing World* the fact that the lighting plot ignored him and focused on the silent Darcy presaged his virtual excision from the rest of the evening, with not even a duet to complement his fine apology for his absence when he did return.

**Caroline Clark** as Jane fared rather the same, although she did get a duet reprise with her sister of *A Husband*, earlier sung with great success by their mother. Other vicissitudes included her illness, during which we saw her climbing into a bed on a rostrum at the back of the stage and then having to pretend to be asleep through a long scene before Mr Bingley brought Elizabeth around via the wings to see her, surely a case for concealment behind blacks until they approached. But her verse of *Changing World* was nicely sung and properly lit, her dialogue clear and true and her acceptance of his eventual proposal did suggest a long and happy marriage (though I don't know if that idea has found favour in the sequel *Death Comes to Pemberley* recently published by author P D James).

I have to confess that I have not seen Colin Firth in what is surely his most famous role as Mr Darcy, so I have no comparison to make, although I do feel that his interpretation will have been made easier by his prior reputation. The necessity for **Matthew Ralph** to be not only shy and reserved (and apparently late on his cues to show his absence of small talk) but rude as well does not make it easy to be loved by the audience, even after the hint given in his part of *Changing World*, and there can be no wet shirts added to this musical version. Only on return in Act 2 could he actually express the feeling which had come over him in his beautifully sung Aria *The One I Could Have Been With You*, but then still endured rejection and misery until after explanations and its reprise as a duet with Elizabeth, when he was allowed to smile at the prospect of a happy ending.

**Beckie Miles**, nominated by ROS this summer for the NODA Louise English award for the young person who has made the most outstanding contribution to a Society, very much came of age with her immensely powerful portrayal of Elizabeth Bennet, dominating the stage with a mature performance to defy her years. Putting over her songs and her dialogue clearly and with meaning, she showed the real independent spirit which allowed her character to defy convention and refuse the odious Mr Collins, earning her father's superb response "Your mother will never see you again if you do not marry Mr Collins – and I will never see you again if you do!". But more seriously she made her refusal of Mr Darcy ring true, as did, after all the explanations, her final acceptance. An amazing performance, and I hope only one of many such which I shall see in the future.

Congratulations to Director **Helen Bailey** and all her cast and the others who have helped to bring this remarkable production to the stage, as well as to experienced Composer and Lyricist **Rita Abrahams** and Librettist, author **Josie Brown**, both of whom it was a privilege to meet. Had they been in the professional production I mentioned in Leicester, no one would yet have seen even a preview and there would be still more weeks to work on necessary adjustments and cuts to bring the running time down from over three hours including the interval. I'm sure they will be working on that after their experience. But if there had been a professional production, the members of ROS would not have had the privilege of creating their roles, something which they will remember for the rest of their lives, and we the audience would not have witnessed this super World Premiere.

Thank you, ROS, for your vision, determination and the amazing result. And thank you for inviting my wife and myself and for our welcome by President **Barbara Johnson** and **Heather Darby**.