

# **NORTH ESSEX THEATRE GUILD SHOWCASE FESTIVAL 2017-18**

**Group:** WITHAM AMATEUR OPERATIC SOCIETY  
**Production:** IOLANTHE  
**Adjudication Date:** 26<sup>TH</sup> APRIL, 2019  
**Venue:** WITHAM PUBLIC HALL  
**Adjudicator:** Dawn King accompanied by David King

## **INTRODUCTION:**

There was the usual warm welcome and efficient management of tickets and programmes from the front of house team, and a good number of volunteers able to show people to their seats and sell the raffle tickets. It was nice to see a number of younger people taking on these roles in general support of their society.

I liked the ironic cover motif of the programme - repeated in aspects of the set design - which specifically excluded “hearts”! There was a lot of general information in the programme, and it made for an interesting pre and post show read. The updating of the operetta was stressed, and certainly the current political climate made this a surprisingly topical production. I noted that all the cast appeared to have contributed to the updating of the script, which must have made for a fun rehearsal process.

## **SET**

The set was minimal throughout – black curtains, with essential pieces of furniture, and when we moved into the Arcadia Club, a relatively small bar area constructed to the rear of the stage. This piece of set too was predominantly black. There was a small attempt to break up the black of the curtaining with a couple typical office/restaurant signs. The only time that we moved from this general setting was for the nightmare scene, although I remain mystified as to why the Lord Chancellor was expected to sleep on a table? Surely if a bed was too difficult to manage for one scene, then he would have been better playing it from a chair...and if it was to signify that he worked so hard he slept in his office, then a clearer indication of “office” was needed.

## **PROPS:**

The cast all handled the glasses used for drinks well and in a naturalistic manner throughout the production. The bar appeared to be very well stocked!

## **COSTUMES:**

I'm afraid that I thought that the approach to costume reflected an overall lack of vision and concept. The fairies in Act 1 were a mish-mash of styles, with no obvious connecting theme, and little relevance to the self proclaimed Essex Girls. Strephon and Phyllis were appropriately costumed in black and white, but whilst Iolanthe's Act 1 Goth style outfit was stylish it failed to stand out from the black set – a mistake that was repeated with the Fairy

Queen's black outfit later. The introduction of stronger colour for the female chorus in Act 2 was a bit of a relief. The men's heavier tweed suits in Act 1 were appropriate, and contrasted nicely with the lighter suits worn in Act 2, but the Lord Chancellor's chinos seemed inappropriate, and it would have been good to see him go into some sort of nightwear for the Nightmare scene.

### **LIGHTING/SOUND:**

The cast were individually miked, and I noted that it was particularly well balanced – both between characters and with the orchestra. Cues were tight and accurate. There were no SFX of note.

Given the absorption of light from the set curtaining, I felt that the lighting was managed well. There were no areas of shadow, and cues were managed with subtlety. The cool blue when the Queen calls for Iolanthe was a nice touch, and the brighter light in the bar in Act 2 was good. I particularly liked the lighting effects created for the Nightmare song.

### **MUSIC/DANCE:**

The movement had been set at a level which enabled all to participate regardless of dance ability. The choreography itself was effective, and the fairies obviously enjoyed it. I liked the relatively traditional moves given to the men in their chorus numbers – but they seemed a little under-rehearsed, particularly in Loudly Let the Trumpets Bray, and therefore lost the sharpness that is necessary to convey this song effectively and emphasise the satire. Perhaps something less obvious than the up/down move might have been better suited.

The excellent orchestra blended well, and provided a solid, well disciplined and tuneful support to the singers.

### **PERFORMANCES:**

**Queen of the Fairies – Rhianna Howard** Rhianna has a confident stage presence, and managed to imbue her character with a sense of aloofness and superiority. We very much like her singing voice, which is naturally strong and pure. However, particularly in Act 1 we felt that she had been directed to adopt a vocal approach which was difficult to sustain, and added little to the characterisation. The Act 2 solo was very nicely executed.

**Iolanthe – Aimee Hart** – Again, a strong lyrical singer, and her ballad in Act 2 was a highlight. Aimee also has a strong sense of physical movement and an ability to express emotion whilst remaining relatively still. This was a genuine, and very watchable performance.

**Phyllis – Amy Buchanan** - This is quite a demanding role vocally, and also in terms of characterisation, and much of the sense of this production depended on Phyllis being able to flirt, be capricious but then to be subtle in her setting her suitors against each other. Amy rose admirably to the vocal challenge, but I felt that she was never sufficiently comfortable in her relationship with Strephon to make it feel plausible, and her reaction to Strephon/Iolanthe was seriously underplayed. This was a difficult acting part, made more so by the way in

which some of the scenes with Strephon had been blocked, but will offer excellent experience for appearances in future productions.

**Strephon – Michael Watling** – WAOS were fortunate to have a personable young leading man in Michael, and he was cheery and focussed playing opposite Phyllis in a well-projected portrayal. However, by their nature, most of the leading tenor roles in G and S are fairly one-dimensional and Michael couldn't really overcome this factor or the operatic challenges of the music. Nonetheless the sincerity of his performance was evident.

**Lord Chancellor – Stuart Adkins** - Stuart's skill and experience combined with his familiarity with G&S allowed him to create his character despite an obviously severe chest/throat problem. He brought energy to the stage, and created pace in the dialogue. We both felt that an announcement at the commencement of the show would have been more appropriate in recognising the problem, and the need for him to continue despite his health problem than the 'cut throat' move during the curtain call.

**Bouncer Willis – Ron Howe** -This modern take on the traditional Sargeant role worked pretty well, and Ron gave it the earthy gravitas to make him believable as a 'bouncer', and gave a very creditable rendition of "When all night long"

**Lord Tolloller – Alex Moore** - / **Lord Mountarat – Richard Herring**

Alex and Richard were both well cast in these roles, and were able to adopt contrasting personae. Their obvious camaraderie spilled over into performance – they both listened carefully to each other, and were entertaining to watch. Alex has a natural rapport with the audience, but I would like to see Richard a little more confident in his music so that we had more facial expression and outward delivery rather than constantly watching the MD.

#### **DIRECTION:**

I have a great fondness for Gilbert and Sullivan, both in its traditional and updated forms, but however it is performed, it needs to retain the quality of musical sound and a degree of visual spectacle. It's understandable that groups want to update G and S to make it appear more relevant and attract a modern (younger? audience) but in doing so you have to ensure that what made the piece so successful in the first place isn't lost. ("The Peer and the Peri") In this production, the appeal of magic v "pomp and circumstance" was missing, and if you came to the piece without prior knowledge I'm not sure you could work out what it was about.

Creating a 'new' version of a production, and removing traditional stylisation also means that greater attention has to be paid to supporting performers to develop characters from remarkably little material, and ensuring that there is a fit between the dialogue and songs. We felt that there had been insufficient time spent assisting characters to explore their relationships with each other, or to understand their part in building the whole story. The absence of visual stimulation meant that the production occasionally seemed somewhat pedestrian. Chorus diction and tonality was sometime suspect and principal dialogue was sometimes slow, with poor uptake on cues.

I wondered whether combining the role of MD/Director meant that there had been insufficient time and capacity to stand back and review all aspects of the production – or indeed to be able to 'bounce' ideas.

Nevertheless, there were some sound individual performances, and the whole production moved along at a good pace musically, with a particularly enthusiastic final chorus, where the enjoyment of the cast communicated itself with the audience.

Thank you for the opportunity to see this production.

Dawn King  
7.5.2019