

The Grand Duke review Friday 28th June 2019 - Hull Echo

On Friday evening I attended Hull Savoyards performance of the little known Gilbert and Sullivan operetta The Grand Duke with my wife Alison at Hessle Town Hall.

Written not long before their final irrevocable split, The Grand Duke has barely been known to see the light of day, being so under-performed makes taking it on quite a risk in this business, so full marks must go to Savoyards for taking that chance.

The story certainly has echoes of this dynamic duos previous, more famous works, with love and catastrophic marriage, plot and more twists than a ballroom dancing competition, built around the drawing of cards as a duel, all of which lead to a very clever finish, as you would expect from such esteemed artists. But huge credit must go to Hull Savoyards for expertly understanding (somehow) and communicating a production plot that would honestly make the Tory leadership race look about as simple as going out and buying some garden furniture without an accompanying photographer.

Much of the cast who treated East Yorkshire to *The Gondoliers* last year are present again in this outstanding production and, once again the element of fun and boundless enthusiasm smiles all the way through a production that will ensure that I never look at a sausage roll the same way again, because of their part in the plot to kill The Grand Duke, if only for a day, or a century.

What this outstanding Hull company always do well are costumes, set design, choreography, acting and singing and once again they were right on the mark this time, with an impressive set change during the interval beautifully moving the story along. Every scene was met with rapturous applause and it was very easy to see why, with the lead characters and the supporting characters all excellently in tune with each other, all adding to the story and, most joyfully of all, making this hitherto unknown Gilbert and Sullivan musical very accessible to all.

Musical Director Martin Lay, who had to work tirelessly to understand a score which has gone largely unnoticed, spending many hours breaking it all down from writing that is over a century old, and made it work magnificently with an orchestra that had maybe about half as many instruments as would be needed for the entire production, trust me you would never have known, so skilled is he in conducting the talented musicians he has to work with.

Very honourable mentions must go to Alice Giblin (Julia Jellicoe) Zoe Sellens (Lisa) Cameron O'Byrne (Ernest Dummkopf) Leon Waksberg (Ludwig) Peter Jonas (title role) and Sophie Rowe who took on the male role of Dr. Tannhauser, Notary, while the team behind them of stage director Stuart Sellens and assistant stage director and choreographer Lydia Baldwin, all came together to give us yet another treat.

Next year Hull Savoyards go from probably the most unknown of Gilbert and Sullivan's works, to probably the best known of all, The Mikado, this reviewer suggests you watch out for tickets and details as soon as they become available, because a show like that, in the hands of this outstanding company, is bound to be one very hot ticket.

The Grand Duke review □ Saturday 29th June 2019. □ NODA -□ □ National Operatic and Dramatic Association.

Holme-on-Spalding-Moor Village Hall

Director Stuart Sellens *MD* Martin Lay *Choreographer* Lydia Baldwin.

The 2019 tour by this G&S focussed society took in three venues and we saw the final performance. Gilbert and Sullivan's last collaboration, and possibly their least known, was here set in the Wild West of the late 1800s. Ludwig, an actor, succeeds Rudolph, the miserly Grand Duke of Pfenning Halbpfenning after "killing" Rudolph by drawing the ace in a statutory duel! By taking on Rudolph's obligations he soon finds himself with more wives and prospective wives than he knows what to do with!

It's not the easiest plot to follow and the script is wordier than I expected. The programme noted that, with Gilbert and Sullivan renowned for topsy-turvy whimsicality, *The Grand Duke* could have been their topsy-turviest!

The society has never presented the show in its 85 year history and it is to their great credit that they undertook this production as most of the cast had probably never done it previously. The music is challenging although typical G&S and the ensemble singing was super and nicely accompanied by The Kingston Savoy Orchestra.

There were some strong individual performances including those from Leon Waksberg as Ludwig, Zoe Sellens (Lisa), Alice Giblin (Julia Jellicoe), Cameron O'Byrne as Ernest Dummkopf, the leader of the travelling theatre group and Peter Jonas who portrayed The Grand Duke. Their vocals were excellent and Alice did a super job of maintaining an American accent throughout.

Supporting well were Sophie Rowe playing the baritone role of Dr Tannhäuser, Sara Peachey (Baroness von Krakenfeldt), John Lamb (The Prince of Monte Carlo) Louise Jacques in a lovely cameo of The Princess of Monte Carlo and Joseph Marshall as the Herald.

The set was very well used on a small stage and the costumes, as always, were very good. So metimes the orchestra was a little overpowering but this did not spoil my enjoyment of the show, even though I probably still don't understand it!

Well done!

Tony Harris

NODA North East District 3 Representative