Review: Albert Herring, by MidWales Opera, at the Roses Theatre, Tewkesbury

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Benjamin Britten's self-indulgence arouses impatience in our reviewer

ALBERT HERRING

This year's celebrations of the centenary of Benjamin Britten's birth are bringing about an unexpected, totally refreshing aspect: a realisation of the flaws in operas which commentators have until now regarded as sancrosanct.

Last Thursday, Britten's lack of self-discipline in Peter Grimes depressed me.

On Saturday, catching up in Tewkesbury's delightfully comfortable, brilliantly sight-lined auditorium with MidWales Opera's tour of Albert Herring, I was irritated by his constant desire to impress, to show what he can do.

Technically adept ensemble after ensemble, certainly expertly delivered, held up the action until at last, one of the finest ensembles in any opera, "In the midst of life is death", stopped us all in our tracks. Self-indulgently endless dwellings upon initially striking ideas (as in the lengthy nocturnal scene) aroused impatience. And Britten's maladroit layering of text upon rapid-pattering high voices rendered diction all but incomprehensible. And this is such a lopsided structure: one hour 45 minutes for the first two acts, then a half-hour third act after the interval. Had Britten composed only that final act, then the show might have gripped more.

As a touring production this Herring had many virtues in terms of its versatile settings - such as designer Adam Wiltshire's perfectly-clipped trees having their foliage lifted off to reveal well-piled pyramids of greengrocery fruit (though his costume-designs seemed inconsistent in period), and Declan Randall's sensitive lighting - but Michael Barker-Caven's direction invited some cavils.

Among which was his sudden deployment halfway through, like a new toy, of confusing silhouettes behind the Suffolk fenland backdrop (what were those characters up to?). Another was his idea to depict the formidable Lady Billows as a Hyacinth Bucket lookalike (a wonderful impersonation by the full-voiced Catrin Aur), a cheap gag which began to disintegrate henceforth. Christopher Turner had little presence as the put-upon Albert for all the first two acts, but really came to life after his drunken life-changing night out. His mother is normally portrayed as a harridan, but not here, in Annie Gill's still-youthful, almost frustrated, performance.

From all the rest of the excellent cast Amy J Payne's Florence Pike, capable both in character and vocally, and Maire Flavin as an appealing Nancy, more emotion in her than in all the rest of the characters put together, were outstanding.

Nicholas Cleobury conducted a slick little orchestra.

It comes to something when one gets more reward relishing the instrumentalists' clarity of line rather than whatever's going off onstage.