Always a bridesmaid: Charles Court Opera's Ruddigore

\*\*\*

By Charlotte Valori, 20 February 2015

We’ve all just survived Valentine’s Day and, whether yours was blissfully love-filled or tragically lovelorn (or prosaically unremarkable), you must spare a sigh for the poor unemployed bridesmaids of Ruddigore, condemned to the perpetual romantic back seat. Sung with warm-voiced relish by Susanna Buckle (Ruth) and Andrea Tweedale (Zorah), these desperate bridesmaids live in the Cornish fishing village of Rederring: “perhaps, the only village in the world that possesses an endowed corps of professional bridesmaids who are bound to be on duty every day from ten to four”... And yet, for six months, no wedding bells have rung. So begins Gilbert and Sullivan’s Ruddigore: an English village comedy in which love is more often frustrated than facilitated, with various hilarious consequences, thanks in part to a dark family curse on the local baronet, and to a girl abandoned to the world at birth with only an etiquette textbook to guide her through the pitfalls of love.

Charles Court Opera’s dynamic and brightly-sung production, created by actor-director John Savournin, captures our attention from the outset and holds it joyfully until the rousing final chorus. James Perkins’ minimalist design works well in the confined space of the historic King’s Head Theatre, while washes of coloured light by Nicholas Holdridge quietly clarify the changing mood scene by scene. The Hammer Horror aesthetic fits the tone of the piece perfectly, leaving it hovering somewhere between The Wicker Man and The Darling Buds of May, with an edge of gleeful surrealism (the ancestors, especially, are brilliantly imagined). Simple, snappy choreography by Phillip Aiden keeps the pace rolling: formation dances are particularly assured, though elsewhere the constant movement can distract, as the actors seem sometimes to be treading the boards to keep warm. W.S. Gilbert’s libretto is as fearsome as usual, but beautifully clear diction from most of the cast ensures we can largely navigate their giant mouthfuls of words without too much difficulty. Set to a charming piano accompaniment from David Eaton, Arthur Sullivan’s lilting and sprightly tunes all sound toe-tappingly good.

Star turns come from Cassandra McCowan as Mad Margaret, and John Savournin as Sir Despard Murgatroyd. McCowan’s sensitive performance combines her fine observation of movement, and her brilliant range of expression in face and gesture, with a rich, sensual mezzo. Whether in her wildly mad scenes or her grudgingly sane ones (when she is recalled to her senses by the soothing qualities of the word “Basingstoke”), McCowan’s mesmerising Margaret is as believable as she is funny, underscored by true pathos. Savournin’s Despard, meanwhile, owns the stage, a tall and louring presence with a smooth voice, absolutely in control of his music and his half-fierce, half-plangent tone at all times. The great success of this production is that it makes you realise good Gilbert and Sullivan does not only depend on skill, and ferocious application, and timing: it is, above all, a question of setting and maintaining a particular emotional tone, dark enough to be moving yet light enough to escape seriousness, which allows these elegant plots to flourish. Charles Court Opera can do this – and they do it well.

We are also treated to fine turns from Simon Masterton-Smith, as Old Adam, and Amy J. Payne as the redoubtable Dame Hannah. Masterton-Smith is picture-perfect as the devoted retainer, his performance brimming with melodrama and subtle humour. Amy J. Payne gives us a Dame Hannah who is not to be messed with, and who also breaks all our hearts in her duet "The pretty little flower and the old oak tree" – a sweet tune which gradually blossoms into the operetta's largest moment of unrestrained elegance and prettiness. As ever in Gilbert & Sullivan, it is middle-aged passions which make the real emotional headlines of this piece.

Her voice clear, supple and light, Rebecca Moon seems perfectly suited to this genre and to the role of Rose Maybud, the cold, proud and calculating maiden with a textbook for a conscience. Rose is not the most appealing of characters, but Moon unearths all the comedy of the part with skilful acting, revealing Rose's tinpot morality through detailed phrasing of both her sung and spoken lines.

Philip Lee is full of energy as the handsome sailor Richard Dauntless, singing his love song to Rose with real feel and wonderful softness. Occasionally, some rather succulent consonants cloud Lee's enthusiastic diction: possibly the result of an attempted accent which veered (for me) between Irish and West Country. Matthew Kellett sings Robin Oakapple well, with fine outbursts of exasperation and shyness, though his acting is less consistent than the rest of the company.

Ruddigore is a glorious comic romp through a very English country village, full of wonderfully awkward Edwardian love and delicious puns. Whatever your Valentine experience this year, you can't help but be swept up in it.