Writer and Director: John Savournin

Reviewer: Hattie Williams

The fabulous cast of Charles Court Opera are back, bursting from the seams of the Rosemary Branch Theatre with their delightfully imaginative new pantomime The Three Musketeers. In the confines of a questionable convent (James Perkins’ set design is more hotchpotch side alley than holy sanctuary) the Musketeers meet again in a hilarious accident of love, lust and liquor that culminates in a plan to save the future of France from the hands of evil Cardinal Richelieu (Kevin Jones).

Nic Holdridge’s simple silhouettes play to the thrills of panto, illuminating the murder of the King and ascension to power of the nasty Cardinal, cackling to flashes of lightning. The creepy tones of Jones are magnified in song as he seeks to thwart the rightful heir to the French throne d’Artagnan (Matthew Kellet), cultivating his plot in a competitive and camp duet with evil side-kick and spy Milord de Winter (Simon Masterton-Smith). Masterton-Smith is a master of the likable villain with an air of Monty Python as he attempts to fool the three Musketeers, find d’Artagnan’s Fleur-de-Lis – the legendary royal emblem – and steal the leading lady, Justice (Holly Julier).

Hot headed stable boy d’Artagnan finds himself thrust headfirst into the politics of state, challenges of love and just how he should handle his sword. His new advisors Athos, Porthos and Aramis (Lexi Hutton, Amy J Payne and Nichola Jolley) steal the show with their eye-watering ensembles and perfectly pitched harmonies despite much frolicking, fist wagging and, of course, ridiculous French accents. The waggling eyebrows and squinting smoulders of the drunken Porthos (Payne) are particularly endearing as he advises d’Artagnan on his new found affection for the appropriately named Justice.

Writer John Savournin shines as Mother Superior, wooing the spectators in true panto-Dame style with side-looks, spoofs, slapstick, even a little seduction that leaves the all-adult audience weeping with laughter and delighting in hisses and hurrahs to bring a basic plot to life. His witty script drags the pleasure of pantomime into the 21st century, even referencing Twitter – ‘I’m so lonely I have to follow myself!’ laments Mother Superior.

Her claims to a ‘mellow exterior’ (to the tune of Aretha Franklin’s I Say a Little Prayer For You) are shot to pieces by Mia Waldon’s fantastically ridiculous costumes. In a bizarre ‘bake-off’ of communion bread involving two audience members, our wide-eyed Mother Superior appears with croissants for shoulder pads and a crucifix of wooden spoons.

David Eaton’s musical direction is a triumph of faultless timing and wonderful wit that amplifies an otherwise ordinary pantomime to the operatic stage, beautifully complemented by Savourin’s deadpan choreography.

Heroes, villains, nuns, a near beheading and a royal wedding, this jam-packed production will draw you in, perhaps not to a true image of 16th Century Paris, but certainly to a trouble-free two hours of uncontainable hilarity. Time well spent.

Runs until January 9th 2013

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