



Society : Banbury Operatic Society  
Production : Merrie England  
Date : 5th August, 2000  
Venue : Broughton Castle, Oxfordshire  
Report by : Diana Sear

## Report

I was very pleased when Gareth Jeremy, the Oxfordshire NODA representative, invited me to report on this celebratory Millennium production, envisaged and staged by BOS with valuable contributions from other talented musical and dramatic organisations. The resulting community spirit and friendship was passed from performers to audience as this was such a happy and joyous occasion!

Due to the kindness of Lord and Lady Saye and Sele, who gave their total support and encouragement throughout the long planning and rehearsal period, historic Broughton Castle was the natural setting and backdrop to Edward German's much loved and highly respected light opera.

### The Production

#### Backdrop and Set Pieces

With its Tudor honey-coloured stone facade, full height projecting windows, battlements to medieval wing at stage right, gabled roofs and tall chimneys, this was a truly magnificent setting. The surrounding moat added splendidly to the authenticity of the Queen's arrival by boat.

Roger Moon (Stage Manager and Set Director) and his backstage crew designed and built additional set pieces, including Egyptian stylised temples patterned with palm trees etc. and an enormous hollow tree trunk for the apparition - all helping to interpret the Masque scene as a play - within - a - play.

#### Lighting and Sound (Graham Simons and T.G.S.)

The lighting was excellent! Congratulations! Spots and floodlighting were used to great effect. I liked the fierce red used over all during the dramatic revelation of the apparition at the top of the tree, and the patriotic dancing colours used over the castle walls during the finale were awe-inspiring!

Unfortunately, the sound system was too overpowering. From the raked seating it was quite distorted mainly whenever the large combined chorus was singing, making it difficult to hear the words. In Act 2, having moved to a lower level to sit on the grass, it was much better. This may have been a 'one performance only' problem. I do hope so! Sound checks over the entire arena should have been made at technical rehearsals.

#### Properties (Chris Underwood, Paula Underwood, Gary Hewitt)

Congratulations on such detailed historical research. Everything looked authentic, from the handcars to the floral hoops! The Royal Barge was beautifully decorated, and banners, canopies and throne were all impressive and colourful.

## Costumes

This was a very well dressed cast! The Queen's grand gown and train were magnificent and I particularly liked the brilliant white dress worn by Bessie at her first appearance - simple yet stylishly romantic! Rustic greens and browns of the foresters contrasted well with the bright, pretty colours of the village maids and dancers. The grand capes and hats worn by Essex and Raleigh looked very dashing. The Yeomen were a marvellous sight in their red and gold, as were the pages and trumpeters.

Hairstyles (Elaine Stanbra, Diana Skinner, Joyce Washburn) were also correct for the period. Jill's hair was suitably, long, straight and dramatic and the May Queen's blonde locks were in good contrast. There were many bearded men which added to the historical look of the piece.

## Make Up (Jenny Tustian)

This was a very large cast with people needing either basic or more complicated character make up. Jenny's skill and experience in her craft resulted in everyone looking exactly right with facial expression clearly obvious.

N.B. So many people worked behind the scenes in this production and all are to be congratulated including the chaperones looking after the children and the dog handlers (I loved the dogs - they were so good and very stately). The Health and Safety Officer, Scuba Divers, and Life Saver were all necessary to the protection of the public. Nico Harding's clever cover design has been circulated afar on posters as well as on the attractive programme, and I am sure has attracted the prospective audience member! I also liked the colour photographs in the programme. Such a pleasant change to see the exterior shots and all so clearly, capturing the moment at rehearsal.

## The Cast

### The Earl of Essex (Gareth Jeremy)

Gareth was very well cast as a powerful member of Tudor aristocracy, and rival to Raleigh for the Queen's hand. 'Who were the Yeomen' was performed with strength and very clear diction. Gareth showed well the patriotic pride of his character through his interpretation of this lovely song which is almost an anthem, Good acting ability and confident stage manner has resulted once again in success for this experienced, popular and talented performer.

### Sir Walter Raleigh (Philip Bloomfield)

Apart from his main character of the dashing Sir Walter Raleigh, Philip was also in disguise as a forester and later as Robin Hood in the actors group, giving him plenty of variety! Skilful musical ability was shown as he sang alone and in a duet and I particularly liked his rendition of 'Dan Cupid hath a Garden', tenderly and expressively interpreted. Congratulations, Philip on a lovely performance far removed from an 'Embarrassed - looking - Bloke - at - the - Back - Of - The - Chorus' in Annie Get Your Gun. (ref. Programme Notes!)

Walter Wilkins (Bruce Walters)

I recall seeing this actor as Jack Point in 'Yeoman' and being impressed by his physical agility and expressive face. As Walter, the role is similar and so well suited to him. Bruce had plenty of singing, dancing and athletic movement to cope with, and had comedic ability leading to much laughter in the audience. His abbreviated version of Romeo and Juliet treated alphabetically was clever as was his performance of 'King Neptune' when he led the chorus to great effect.

Silas Simkins (Michael Seeley)

As Walter's sidekick, Simkins was also involved in plotting, play-acting and fooling around! Michael also showed a good sense of comedy, jollity and boisterous movement. With Wilkins, he sang about 'The Big Brass Band' which was a popular number with the audience. Michael and Bruce were an excellent team, giving great theatrical support to each other.

Long Tom (Stuart Esworthy): Big Ben (Graham Nottingham)

Long Tom and Big Ben were 'alike as pot and kettle' but for the fact that Long Tom loved Jill, whereas Ben agreed with those who thought she was a witch. Good acting and singing skills were needed by Stuart and Graham also. Their introductory song 'We are Two Proper Men' was positively and brightly sung and I liked the Quartet when they joined with Bessie and Jill to sing 'In England Merrie England'. Stuart as Tom showed well his loyalty and love for Jill as he fought on her behalf and kept the crowds at bay.

This was another great acting duo showing excellent teamwork.

Four Men of Windsor

Butcher (Chris Smith): Tinker (Alan Martin): Baker (Richard Briggs): Taylor (Maurice Smith)

The four tradesmen were great characters who were so believable. They looked robust, sturdy 'happy with their lot'. The country accents used by the actors were very authentic as was the raucous laughter. Their mistrust and dislike of Jill was made very clear to us by their shouted remarks and antagonistic behaviour. Congratulations to Chris, Alan, Richard and Maurice. I liked these performances very much.

Queen Elizabeth (Margaret Stear)

A very regal performance by Margeret! Her entrance was magnificent and her upright carriage as she processed with her entourage across the courtyard was so impressive. She really looked like The Queen one remembers from the history books. Her movements and general behaviour were imperious and positive and she could show real anger as she condemned, imprisoned and banished three of her subjects as well as the contrasting emotion of fear on seeing the apparition of Heroine the Hunter.

'O Peaceful England' was sung with the appropriate tranquillity and with great musical style and ability. Her country was for once at peace but her cry to her subjects was 'to grasp thy sword and shield' and she would lead the way to prevent England from destruction.

### Miss Bessie Throckmorton (Ann Sloan)

I have always enjoyed performances by this talented singer and actress. Ann looked radiant in white as she sat on the central steps singing 'She had a letter from her love' - so poised and still. The duet with Raleigh 'When true love hath found a man' was joyful and melodious but I thought her performance of 'O who shall say that love is cruel' was utterly beautiful. Her glissandi were effortless and her descriptive powers in music were a great asset, making her a real coloratura. She stayed in character throughout, revealing her misery at the loss of her letter, her love for Raleigh and her awesome respect for the Queen. This was another memorable performance!

### Jill - All - Alone (Ruth Anker)

Jill was the witch hated and feared by all except Long Tom. She was wild and roamed free. Ruth's performance in this role was exemplary. With her long dark hair, expressive flashing eyes and expansive arm movements, she was at the centre of the plot and the focus of the drama. The mystery and magic of a witch was displayed so well as she was wraithlike, moving so quickly and silently across the scenes. I liked her opening song 'Oh where the deer do lie' as she told of her home 'in the forest shade, down in a dappled glade' She showed well the misery of her life as an outcast and her loneliness through good musical and facial expression.

### The May Queen (Miranda Walton)

Miranda as the pretty May Queen was full of joie-de-vivre, mischief and she was a troublemaker! She said early on in the show, 'What games shall we play?' which we could understand to mean that she would like to cause some type of sensation!

When Jill was accused of witchcraft and the Queen ordered her death, the May Queen showed great delight, having been the instigator of this plot. Miranda was also the Princess in the masque about St. George, performing with her character's usual self-awareness, and precociousness. Miranda showed a variety of theatre skills in her performance - acting, singing and dancing, all competently performed.

### The Queen's Fool (Nic Lester)

Nic was the Queen's Jester who was in disguise as an apothecary and was willing to sell poison to kill Bessie. We were amused at one of his lines 'It is easier to stay the loss of speech in a man than in a woman!' Although a small role, it was still very well acted which is always so important

James Harper and Jenny Tustian played their supporting roles of a Lord and Lady-in-Waiting with confidence and style.

## Choreography

### Susan Taylor and Sharon Ulla

Dancing throughout was of a high standard and mostly English traditional based on ballet e.g. the hornpipe dance. There was good variety in the steps chosen and dancers had been trained thoroughly so that everything looked right. Footwork was neat and arm and leg movements graceful, forming good body lines. The Egyptian Dance again was traditional and well choreographed and brought back memories as I also took part in this dance many years ago! All the dances made beautiful pictures which an audience loves to see. Thank you, dancers, for such splendid performances!

## Music

Musical Director - Goff Hales

Associate Directors - Andrew Johnson and Philip Smith

Members of the stage chorus were dressed in appropriate Tudor costume as Lords and Ladies, Vendors, Foresters, Wenches, Townsfolk, Players, Yeomen and Dancers. Landlady (Jean Bonner), Schoolteacher (Tricia Campbell), Pages (Benjamin Godfrey, Jack Mitchell), Queen's Attendant (Kate Wolstencroft) and Master at Arms (David Bishop, Ken Lilley) all played supporting roles. The group of children in the show were wonderful and the Fanfare Trumpeters added to the patriotic and regal atmosphere.

Supported by a large augmented choir from Banbury Choral Society, Nottingham University G & S Society and friends of BOS, the singing was tuneful and majestic. The contrast in musical style was evident. We heard lilting country folk tunes full of joy such as 'The Month of May has come today' while 'Long live Elizabeth' and 'Who were the Yeomen' were sung with fervour and strong attack. Musical technique had been well considered with tonal quality, timing and dramatic expression faultless.

Everyone in the large chorus stayed in character throughout and became part of Elizabethan life, with good reactions to event happening around him or her. Congratulations to the Banbury Symphony Orchestra who supported the singers so thoroughly and with such skill and later led us all to join in the singing in our own patriotic way!

## Presentation

Director - Andrew Wilson-Jenner

The production was set in a wide panorama which must have been very difficult for the Director. Blocking needed much consideration and entrances and exits must have been a headache! Distance was so important to ensure people were at the right place, at the right time and that the audience would be able to see everything from any position in the arena.

This has all been well-achieved. The layout was planned cleverly with the static choir and orchestra to one side, and of course the beautiful moat was a gift, as was the castle itself.

Everything flowed so well! There were no embarrassing gaps at all. Actors had obviously been rehearsed well, not only with lines and characterisations but with athletics! People really had to move quickly and sensibly to arrive anywhere, even from stage left to right.

Casting was excellent - we could really believe in the characters. Elizabethan England was there for all to see!

I always look for pictures in a musical show. This production was full of them - the entrance of the Yeomen at the opening, the entrance of the Queen and the dramatic appearance of the apparition, to name but a few!

Positioning of the chorus members was well-considered and arranged in ever changing groups. The threat of Jill-All-Along was well shown as the townsfolk backed away from her whenever she appeared - a nice dramatic touch. Contrast was always there between the authority and pomp of the Queen's presence and the happy country scenes of the Windsor folk.

I liked all the processions and pomp, e.g. banners hung from the castle walls, and again in contrast, I enjoyed the style and serenity of Bessie's first appearance with the quietly seated group at stage right and Wilkins so still by his cart.

Maybe some of the small hand movements made by the chorus when singing could have been more exactly choreographed but this is a small criticism and would be found unnecessary by the audience generally!

I can only add my congratulations to Andrew. He has used imagination, good theatrical technique and a disciplined leadership to create such a beautiful production. Congratulations also to the Musical Director, his team of musicians both instrumental and vocal, the choreographers, behind-the-scenes team and of course all the actors taking part.

A hardworking committee has been responsible for the show taking place, together with three Associate Directors - Janet Bishop, Jo Markham and Ian Preece. Congratulations to everyone!

My thanks to the President of B.O.S., Lyn Woodruff, for her kind hospitality. It was such a happy evening. Thank you!

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