

WHARFEDALE FESTIVAL OF THEATRE 2008-2009:
WRITTEN ASSESSMENT

Musical: *The Hunchback of Notre Dame*

Entrant: Ilkley Amateur Operatic Society

Performance seen: 6.3.2010 **Venue:** King's Hall, Ilkley

1. Stage Presentation

This heading includes stage setting, props, lighting, sound, costumes and make-up.

The staging of this piece was simple but impressive, with the cathedral's arches upstage, two other arches stage left and stage right, and the bell-tower with its stairway stage right. The restrictions you have to deal with over the securing of scenery made the two side arches vulnerable when large numbers of people had to enter through them, and from time to time they wobbled. I know this is difficult, but the cast do need reminding again not to touch the sides of archways when they enter and exit.

You had done away with follow-spots in favour of intelligent lighting and this worked extremely well, enabling the achievement of much more complex lighting effects than before. Costumes were excellent - colourful, in period, and easy to wear for the cast. Quasimodo's prosthetic hump and facial deformity were superbly done, and the make-up for all the other characters was very good.

Furniture was fine and in general props were good. It was unfortunate that one of the "earthenware" mugs in use at the inn fell to the floor during Act Two and landed with an obviously plastic sound, as well as betraying that there had been no liquid in it. However, accidents will happen. I appreciate it wasn't meant to fall to the floor and, if it had not, the illusion that it was an earthenware tankard full of ale would have remained intact.

2. Production

This heading includes interpretation of the spirit and meaning of the play, teamwork, general pace and variation in tempo, grouping and movement, making of points, and sense of climax. It is also under this heading that an assessor takes account of the greater difficulty involved in tackling a production with a large cast.

This show was a brave choice for Ilkley Amateurs. *The Hunchback of Notre Dame* is not well known; there are no catchy numbers that people will go home singing; and the story is a deeply challenging one - very different from the kinds of story normally told in a musical. You must have known from the start that audience numbers would probably be down on previous years because of your choice of show, and they were. Not only that, but I suspect

some people who were present for Act One on the night I came did not return after the interval having been horrified by the violence and sheer evil of the scene that closes Act One. I imagine this may have happened on other nights, too.

The expectation of audiences for straight plays is that sometimes they will be made to laugh and sometimes they will be made to think, depending on the type of play they have come to see. In contrast, the expectation of audiences for musicals is that they will go home singing a catchy tune from the show and that they probably won't have been made to think particularly deeply about anything very much. *The Hunchback of Notre Dame* does not fit that stereotype because its message is serious. The audience is made to think about what sadly still happens in this world when people are judged solely by their appearance. Esmeralda is forced into the role of sex object because of her ethnicity and physical beauty, and Quasimodo is assumed to be stupid and inherently bad because of his disability and ugliness. Nor is the audience let off the hook by having someone they can easily blame for this, for it is the ordinary people of Paris as well as the cardinal and the priest who abuse Quasimodo and Esmeralda. The ordinary people. Can we say that never happens nowadays? No, we can't.

The music in this show was quite simply outstanding - a tribute to the skill of the musical director, the singing ability of everyone on the stage, and the musicianship of the orchestra. With almost no spoken dialogue, *The Hunchback of Notre Dame* is just a whisker away from opera, and the music is neither well-known nor easy to sing. The changes of mood on stage, from the loving tenderness of Esmeralda and the poet to the raucous bawdiness of the inn on the other, were achieved by impressive and seemingly effortless changes in singing style. The singing by the chorus during the candle-lit procession of hooded monks through the auditorium and on to the stage was spiritual and moving, making the contrast with the brutality of the treatment meted out to Quasimodo in the name of the church all the more horrific.

The direction of the crowd scenes was also outstanding. Wherever one looked in a crowd scene something was happening because the chorus - whether of children or adults - had been split into small sub-groups who were all doing something different. Life in all its complexity was everywhere. And the use of the auditorium as well as the stage for some of the entrances by the chorus worked very well.

The murder of Clopin by Marique was very well staged. The fight scene between the poet and Clopin was realistic and had been cleverly choreographed. However, the poet did help Quasimodo when Quasimodo picked him up, which he should not have done since he was supposed to be so deeply unconscious as to be near death.

3. Acting

This heading includes characterisation, audibility of speech, variation in tone, appropriateness of emphasis, gesture and movement.

Audibility was excellent throughout, despite the well-known acoustic problems of the King's Hall. You've cracked it!

- Quasimodo: A superb performance, deeply moving. I believed in you completely.
- Esmeralda: You really looked the part; you can sing; you can dance; and you can act. Excellent.
- Cardinal: This is a complex character to portray but you succeeded in bringing out his humanity as well as the darker side of his character - the brutality and the hidden torment of his desire for Esmeralda.
- Priest: You relished your creation of this deeply unpleasant, unthinking, narrow-minded bigot. This was a fine piece of character acting.
- Clopin: Yet another psychopathic villain for you to play, in accordance with your chosen specialism! A good performance.
- Pierre: A nice portrait of one of the few decent characters in this story.
- Marique: A good performance. I believed in your love for Pierre.
- Sheria: A good performance.
- Coppenhall: A good performance as the sidekick who inherits Clopin's cloak, the symbol of his leadership.
- Bofenue: A good performance in support of Clopin and Coppenhall.

4. Theatrical Attainment

This heading covers the general impression made by the performance as a whole, the type of play chosen, its dramatic merit, the suitability of the cast, the originality and effort shown in the performance and the standard achieved.

The quality of this production was very high indeed, and it deserved much better audiences than it got. The direction was excellent; the acting and singing of a very high standard. There were no weak links. And you chose a challenging show to do, both musically and in terms of the subject matter. You can be very proud of what you all achieved with this production.

10.3.2010

(Bernard Riley)