

WOKING AMATEUR OPERATIC SOCIETY

PRESENTS

THE HIRED MAN

A GREAT BRITISH MUSICAL

5 - 8 May 2010

“FOR WE ARE THE PEOPLE OF
ENGLAND; WE HAVE NOT SPOKEN YET.
SMILE AT US, PAY US, PASS US, BUT DO
NOT QUITE FORGET”





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'THE HIRED MAN' – MAY 2010
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Probably like the majority of your audience I had never heard of, let alone seen this musical and set as it is in an austere period when people were willing to do almost anything to earn some cash, it does not make for light-hearted entertainment. This is certainly no frothy feel good factor musical, but is such a powerful piece and was so well presented that it held the audience's attention from start to finish.

Congratulations to Fiona Blackburn on her imaginative and creative direction. The 'freezes' by the cast were most effective and added to the drama of the story with less exits and entrances to detract from the main action. Also to the team for the set which, with simple adjustments made by the cast and crew, adapted to the different locations. The conversion to the battlefield was achieved swiftly, and because the trench wall was so high it was as though we were in there with them. It was incredibly atmospheric and the lighting reinforced the chaos, death and fear of the war to end all wars.

In the first scene the impression of poverty and desperation was also enhanced by the lighting, and brought to mind black slaves in an arena being bought for their services. It provided a really thought provoking opening to the show.

Although the music was unknown the 'Song of the hired man' and its sombre message became quite familiar as the show progressed. Some of the numbers were very difficult to sing but the cast coped well with them. Paul Harris led his small band competently and there was only one number, in the second act, in which the volume was too great. There was a hiatus with little happening on stage before the musicians came in for one of the first numbers which I think was 'Now for the first time'. An earlier start during the dialogue or more business for the cast was needed.

Tasha Bennett was extremely good as Emily. Her strength is in her acting but she sang clearly and tunefully, and she sympathetically portrayed the life of such a woman at that time. The loving relationship with her husband John and the developing attraction for Jackson were nicely pointed.

As John, Patrick Coad became more confident as the show moved along and his rendition of 'Blackrock' was filled with passion. His northern accent didn't carry through to his solos but that is a small point in an otherwise very good performance.

The 'other man' Jackson Pennington, had his opportunity with Emily as she found married life less and less satisfying, and it was easy to see why Emily strayed. Brett Walker's natural manner produced a charming and confident Jackson and his recorded voice, which was good, played as he was dying, made for an incredibly moving and dramatic scene.

Anthony Batchelor almost stole the show as Isaac with his winning ways and open heartedness, and he had an excellent accent. He appeared completely relaxed on stage.

Playing Seth, Peter Heath had little accent but gave a convincing performance as the older brother and the well-behaved Lily didn't upstage him.

Samantha Jane Clark also had a very good accent, clear diction and her singing was good in the role of Emily. The story came over clearly in the duet between her and Tasha.

As Squire Pennington, Roger Thomas was suitably important and the two young people who played Harry and May gave lovely performances. The close brother and sister relationship depicted by Chris Peters and Megan Beynon, made for another touching scene as Harry left his family to fight for England. Megan's accent was sound and her singing voice sweet.

There were many more named characters and they all played their part in making this a truly memorable show.

The scene with live music from the performers was full of energy and high spirits, and the slow motion fight between John and Jackson with dramatic lighting was especially good.

There is no mention of costume suppliers in the programme but I assume that at least the soldiers and nurses ones were hired. They were particularly authentic looking and

overall the costumes were good. There were a couple of pairs of combat trousers which were not quite right, and in the 1920 section the costumes had not changed much, but no doubt money was short and the women would not have been able to afford more up to date dresses? They were however brighter which created the right feel. May's dress although a young and pretty one resembled the style of the forties. These points on costume are just small ones in a production in which I could find little fault. Make-up was fine and the leads aged realistically as time passed.

Sound, sound effects and the lighting contributed to the impact of the production, and the back stage crew worked unobtrusively but they should all wear long sleeved black tops. The pair of white arms drew attention when scenery was changed.

The cast doubling for the many parts worked well except in the case of Jackson. I heard someone say, 'Oh, he didn't die then' and he did look the same as when in the role of Jackson. I appreciate that he kept his head down and was at the back of the stage but he has a distinctive look so perhaps the addition of facial hair would have helped.

Agricultural props were utilised to good effect in the first number and the props throughout were in keeping with the piece.

Your programme is well set out and Gillian Freeman's recollections of her great grandfather's life added special interest. I'm sure you will be entering it for the competition as usual.

Front of house team were most efficient and I thank you for inviting me to see 'The Hired Man', also for your hospitality on a truly memorable evening.

E. Gloria Smith

N.O.D.A. Regional Representative District 12