

Surrey Mirror

1976 Calamity Jane

Anyway, the audience loved it ...

The critic is faced with a rather difficult job when confronted by a work; in this case "Calamity Jane", by East Surrey Operatic Society, which is obviously being thoroughly enjoyed by the whole of the audience but in which he can find little merit. Even when produced on the professional stage, it has little to offer in my opinion. Certainly it has two good musical numbers. "The Black Hills of Dakota" and "My Secret Love" yet the latter is placed so late in the score that we have already tired of the hack music which precedes it. But its plot is at best a watered down version of an old theme. In a world of sexual equality why does the woman still need- to be shown as being tamed by her man in order to prove her femininity? Bill and Calamity is weird, to say our "heroine" is a vindictive, aggressive, loud-mouthed violent anti-feminist liar!

If the normal laws of human relationships are swept aside to make for an evening's "enjoyment", just where do we start to look for it? Possibly the best place is with Felstead as Francis Fryer. He proved to be the most likeable as well as the most accomplished performer of the whole evening. He was totally alive and convincing whenever he was on stage and had a complete understanding of the way to relate a musical to its audience. His eyes carried total conviction even in his two vaudeville numbers. Andrew Glass as Wild Bill Hitchcock has the right build and suavity for the part but it was difficult to see why he was called wild. His voice is pleasant, but tends become edgy when he pushes it. Angela Terribile as Katie made a strong contrast to Calamity her self.

Of the smaller parts Peggy Baily made an excellent fat frump of Madeleine Adams, the fading matinee idol and; Malcolm Howe was nicely type-cast as Henry Miller. Calamity herself was played by Gillian Jarvis. One has to admire the amount of energy and enthusiasm she brought to the part and the tremendous sense of attack all of the time. However, not even her considerable talent could make the transition from strident tomboy to a meek all-American girl without cracks showing. This was also unfortunately true of her voice for many of the numbers were really too wide for her vocal range.

The real strength of the company lies in its chorus work which was never short of superb. Colin Copestake should be highly congratulated for the extremely high standard of the choral singing and orchestral playing. The sense of attack and unison enjoyment was universally evident when the chorus were on stage. This hard core of quality tended to rub off and make us forget the shortcomings of the work itself and when the music was good as in the beautiful night scene of the "Black Hills of Dakota" it was nothing short of excellent. The costuming was strong and colourful though not always quite entirely to character. The wedding dresses at the end were out of period. I suppose we are going to have to put up with the hideous scenic efforts which are 30 years out of date until they eventually drop to pieces. The lighting was perfunctory, but at least bright enough to let us see,

what was happening. The dancing was good and accurate, though it never had any connection with what was going on the rest of the stage. Rex Baines had a difficult task and managed to succeed well for most of the time.

The chorus was always well-grouped and most of the motivation for action was credible. Next year, the society intends to do "Orpheus in the Underworld" by Offenbach. The work is certainly well within their obvious expertise and the abilities and resources they have on hand. Perhaps they will rethink their policy towards staging so that the production is as rewarding visually as vocally.

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