

East Surrey Operatic Society: Review

Performance: The Most Happy Fella

Review by: Tony Flook (Reproduced courtesy of Surrey Mirror)

East Surrey Operatic Society (ESOS), The Harlequin, Redhill.



East Surrey Operatic Society (ESOS) dug deep into the archives to find this largely-forgotten gem of a show and gave audiences at The Harlequin an example of non-professional musical theatre at its best.

The story, set around 1930, is simple. Tony, an Italian immigrant grape farmer in California's Napa Valley, falls for a young waitress when on a visit to San Francisco. He, though, is ageing and unattractive so he woos her by letter, ultimately enticing her to marry him by sending a photograph of a younger, better-looking man.

Complications are inevitable but the couple eventually establish what should be a lasting relationship.

The Most Happy Fella is closer to being an Opera than to a conventional musical - there's relatively little dialogue; the story and the characters' personalities are developed more in song than in spoken word. This is where ESOS scored. Every one of the dozen or more lead and supporting actors had voices that were absolutely right for their roles.

Alastair Lindsey-Renton never faltered as the generous-hearted Tony. He totally immersed himself into his role and conveyed his emotions through vocal inflexions and totally believable body language. His broken English was carefully modulated and always intelligible. His philosophy was shown

early on in the title number - he was, undoubtedly, The Most Happy Fella.

Sally Hatton won sympathy as Rosabella, the object of his affection, duped into marrying the wrong man. She first showed her ability in Somebody, Somewhere and, later when duetting with Tony in the moving My Heart is so Full of You.

Francis Radford epitomised the free-wheeling Joe, summing up his outlook in the wistfull Joey, Joey.

Louise Forrest and Chris Whitebread added a light touch - she as a none-too-bright waitress bemoaning My Poor, Poor Feet, who meets the easy-going farmhand and, finds that they are both from D-A-L-L-A-S, and, naturally enough, made for each other.

Hilary Samways gave strong support as Tony's austere, convention-bound sister. The trio of chefs harmonised perfectly (and humorously) with Benvenuto, as did the local lads Watching all the girls go by.

The seven young children all looked at home on the stage and added credibility to the age-range of their town.

Ensemble work was well co-ordinated but, despite the large stage, group movement was occasionally awkward.

Vic Ruocca should be proud of his young, attractive dancers, who interpreted his often bright choreography with feeling.

No one worked harder than Susan Rowlinson and her orchestra, which played almost throughout and reflected the show's many, frequently changing moods impeccably.

Put simply, the production was a triumph for director Gillian Jarvis and her entire team.