

1963

Bessie Quite Won My Heart Too

'Merrie England' at Redhill

"My heart is always Bessie's", sings Sir Walter Raleigh to Queen Elizabeth's maid of honour, Bessie Throckmorton, and I must confess that mine was too, after hearing Joyce Gascoine-Pees sing a leading role in the Borough Centenary production of "Merrie England" at Redhill market Hall last week. Edward German's best loved of all the English light operas - it has been called his masterpiece - as beautifully presented by the East Surrey Operatic Society in a feast of music, colour and dancing.

The company, not numerically strong by amateur operatic standards, made up in quality what they lacked in numbers - and let's face it, could not have crammed any more on the limited stage space. The surmounted, without apparent sign of nerves, the hurdle of a dinner-jacketed first night audience which included the Mayor of Reigate, Councillor E. G. Stoneham, deputy mayor, Alderman H. J. Best, councillors and a good sprinkling of old people, who were admitted at half-price.

From the drop of Christopher Slater's baton to the final curtain of Robin Hood's wedding, the production flowed. Bad hall acoustics lost much of the chorus's initial tone but the quality of the talent shone through all the difficulties of singing and grouping in cramped space. The full cast of the lavishly dressed production won their just reward for weeks of hard work attending Thursday night rehearsals all through the bitter cold of January and February, and the principals earned the plaudits of a most appreciative first night audience for individual performances. The orchestra was beautifully conducted by musical director Mr Slater, who already has many eminent concerts behind him, and he left no one in any doubt that he held the reins. On him rested the responsibility for success or failure, and how well he took it.

The delightful Bessie - what a change to see a singer who is not afraid to open her mouth - was beautifully rounded in her musical phrasing and a charming actress. Her slight stature against the tall frame of John Fallon, as Sir Walter Raleigh, added to the romance which the part demanded. Mr Fallon, a virile young man with a good carriage, excelled in the tenor roles, particularly "Dan Cupid hath a garden ...". Andrew Glass and his brand of winning charm made easy work of the Earl of Essex, the 'villainous' courtier who earned himself justly an encore for "The Yeomen of England" whose "spirit is rather of the eighteenth than the sixteenth century". An enchanting nut brown maiden, Jill All Alone, was bewitchingly sung and played by dainty Molly Greaves. Molly's music, not the easiest to sing, was predominant in diction and spot-on note. She grabbed most of the chances to steal the scene from her colleagues. Elizabeth Clayden was musically sound but rather stiffer than we might have expected to find in a May Queen with her retinue of players.

Fred Harrison scored with a captivating piece of whimsy as the strolling player Walter Wilkins. He never had me convulsed but I was highly amused at his slapstick timing

with fellow conspirator Silas, played by Jack Brough. Long Tom and Big Ben, “the flowerpot men” of Sherwood Forest, were well matched in height, feature and makeup. They might well have been twins. John Rapley and William Fry – their names on the programme assured us they were not. A quartet of knaves – the butcher, baker, tinker and tailor of Douglas Chantler, Eugene Crawley, Don Nichol and Stanley Nightingale added to the fun of the forest caper, and the queen’s fool of Godfrey Hill was a small piece of buffoonery, which added to the colour of the court scene.

“Long Live Elizabeth”, the magnificent chorus which I always feel should end the production, brought Joan Passingham on to the stage at the halfway stage. Her “O Peaceful England” was sweetly if not powerfully sung and completely in character as the great queen with “the body of a feeble woman, but with the heart and stomach of a king” ... Out of the melting pot of unknowns discovered the very pleasant bass voice of Michael Macdonald in a small role as a courtier gave a fleeting impression that he could have handled a bigger part. One to watch perhaps.