

East Surrey Operatic Society: Review

Performance: Merrily We Roll Along

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

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



There's nothing unusual about plays in which we see relationships develop and breakdown. Stephen Sondheim's "Merrily We Roll Along" is different. It starts in 1976, when Frank is a successful film producer, Mary a washed-up drunk and Charley's name must not even be mentioned between them. The story then tracks back, progressively, over the years to finish in 1957, when the three first become friends with their own dreams and ambitions. It is a rewarding if, at times, demanding experience for the audience as well as for the performers. ESOS's memorable production, directed

by Lydia Easton at The Harlequin, held attention throughout and was well up to professional quality in many ways.

It's one thing for an actor to portray a character who evolves in the usual chronological way. In this show the key players are faced with the challenge of having to revert, stage by stage from middle age to bright young hopefuls. Frank, played by Alastair Lindsey-Renton, is the most forceful of the trio; we eventually learn that he was driven by the ambition to achieve commercial success from the time he was a young man, using his skills as a composer as a springboard. By contrast, Charley, the lyricist, (Chris Whitebread), is from first to last intent on maintaining his musical integrity. Mary, Sarah Males, always secretly in love with Frank, worked her way up in the literary world before sinking into alcohol-induced near oblivion.

These three all showed considerable stage presence, each personalised to their particular character. Their individual singing was near-faultless and they harmonised perfectly in 'Old Friends'.

The talent did not stop there. Louise Forrest was striking as the grasping, marriage-wrecking Gussie. Joe, portrayed with understanding by Terry Foster, slid from being a top producer to a bum, relying on handouts from Gussie, his ex-wife. Alys Dreux brought pathos to Beth, Frank's first wife, driven to divorce because of his infidelity.

It was encouraging to see young performers in key supporting parts, including eleven year-old Connor Vickery, who looked a natural as Frank and Beth's son.

Ensemble work was above average and the whole team moved easily on the basic, multi-level set to Louise Wright's generally simple but totally effective choreography. Grouping made a major impression.

Colin Warnock's small wind and percussion-dominated band made a vital contribution in maintaining the pace.

The only technical problem was some imbalance in the sound, compounded by the fact that not all performers wore personal mikes, which meant that crucial early dialogue was lost.

Ian Fagg's imaginative lighting was, by turn, subtle and dramatic.

It may be difficult even for ESOS to surpass the standard it set in this production.