

The Most Happy Fella

Review by: Tony Flook

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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 wistful *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.



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The Most Happy Fella

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It is not often that one has the opportunity of seeing a production of this heart warming musical by Frank Loesser. Although the plot and the sentiments expressed in it maybe considered by today's moral standards "old fashioned" it still has considerable appeal especially to an older audience. Musically it appears to be very demanding and its complexity may be one of the reasons why groups with less overall vocal ability than is available in your group may not wish to tackle it. Another reason might be that as it is not so well known societies may not wish to risk a financial loss through low box office sales.

The action takes place in San Francisco and the Napa Valley in California. Apart from the opening, all of the scenes were of exteriors. Several of these were played in front of a backcloth representing vine clad hills. The placement of flats etc. representing the different buildings of the farm contributed to a relatively simple set that allowed plenty of space for the Director, Gillian Jarvis, to move and group the large cast. Scene changes were quickly done resulting in a smooth flowing production. Scenery, flats etc. blended harmoniously and the colours of brown, fawn and gold in which they were painted gave a feeling of the warmth associated with a climate suitable for wine growing and also the friendliness of the community that the benevolent owner of the farm, Tony, had created.

These tones had also been adopted by the designers of the lighting plot, and were used to light the backcloth and other scenery to suggest the time of day during which the action was taking place. Interesting patterns in similar colours were also projected onto the stage cloth for some of the scenes.

Costumes and make up appeared to be appropriate to the period and place of the piece and to the social positions of those wearing them.

The musical score seemed to an untutored ear to be rather complex and was not only used to accompany the singers whether they be soloists, in trios, in quartets or as an ensemble but was often used to help enhance a number of dramatic effects. Nevertheless, the large orchestra were never allowed by their Director, Susan Rowlinson, to dominate those singing. A number of the musical numbers have an operatic quality about them requiring them to be delivered by trios and quartets with each singer having to be responsible for a different melody line. This would seem to demand absolute concentration in order that it is rendered correctly. Particularly impressive in this respect was *She's Gonna Come Home With Me* by Tony, Marie and Cleo towards the end.

In your production, without exception, all those cast as principals were able to display the vocal talent and the training that many had obviously received. They were supported by a large chorus who although perhaps not involved as often vocally as in some shows sang strongly and enthusiastically throughout. At other times they, including a number of children, peopled the stage to represent the community to which they belonged. Some were allowed to develop their characters such as the small waitress with the trolley that was an amusing feature of the first scene.

The hero of the piece, Tony Esposito was played by Alastair Lindsey-Renton. In the story, Tony is kindly, middle aged, and although not very good-looking seeking a wife with whom to share the rest of his life and his good fortune is seeking. Although Alastair may be rather younger than the written age of the part and although he lacks the facial colouring and features expected from one of Latin extraction, he was able by the manner in which he stood and moved able to suggest the older man. Having to lapse into passable Italian when aroused can only have made the part more taxing. However, through his acting, by his manner and with his splendid voice he gave an impeccable portrayal of the character.

The object of his affections was Amy, dubbed by Tony as Rosabella. In this role, Sally Hatton's first class soprano voice was superb even when dealing with some rather difficult passages. She showed Amy to be of a far more reserved disposition than her fellow waitress, Cleo. Therefore, her behaviour after being confronted by an injured Tony followed by the rushed marriage leading to her moral lapse with Joe was rather surprising.

A complete contrast to Amy was Cleo (Louise Forrest). She opened the show with a plaintive song complaining about the effect of her job on her feet but transformed into a very extrovert character after moving to the farm and meeting Herman, the likable chap played by Chris Whitebread who overcomes his timidity in her defence. Earlier she had sparkled, sang and danced while eulogising her home town of *Dallas* with a *Big D*. In this number she was supported by a first rate troupe of dancers.

Tony's sister, Marie, played by Hilary Samways, hated the idea of allowing another woman into his life. She was the dark brooding presence threatening his hope of happiness. She too sang very well with a distinctive mezzo voice. However, perhaps her assumption of an Italian accent made her spoken words rather stiff and unnatural.

Francis Radford as the easy going foreman, Joe was surprised that he should be mistaken for Tony and by taking advantage of Amy's confusion creates a situation that initially threatened to ruin Tony's happiness. He sang very pleasantly the several numbers in which he was involved including the well taken *Joey, Joey, Joey*.

One of the most memorable numbers in the show is *Standing on the Corner* and this was rendered most successfully with appropriate dance steps by Chris Whitebread, Michael Saunders, Andrew BurrIDGE and Luke Kempner. The three chefs at the farm, Steve Bonnett, Kevin Wood and Kevin Stuart were responsible for plenty of the comic business singing *Abondanza* as they were busy preparing the *Sposalizio* prior to the wedding. In his first principal role with the Society, Adrian Martin acquitted

himself well as the Doctor and Frederick Harrison gave his usual sound performance as the postman.

It would seem that the way in which the action, music and dance was integrated so successfully in this production could only have been achieved by such a close knit team as is personalised by Gillian Jarvis (Director), Susan Rowlinson (Musical Director) and Vic Ruocca (Choreographer). All credit to them for a first rate production.

This show has a number of songs that were not so well known and I wondered whether your patrons would have appreciated their listing with details of who were responsible for singing them in the programme and a reminder of what they had seen and heard.

My wife, Jackie, and I were very pleased that you should have invited us to yet another of your excellent productions. We enjoy our visits to The Harlequin and for being made so welcome by Andrew and Julie Glass and for having the opportunity to talk about matters theatrical whilst enjoying your hospitality in the interval.

Reg Hamby

Regional Representative

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