

Fiddler on roof brings house down . . . nearly

Slick and innovative production lacks a bit of menace

THOM DIBDIN

Fiddler on the Roof, Church Hill Theatre ***

THERE is a cracking energy and sense of pace to this strong production of Fiddler on the Roof from local amateur company Tempo.

For a production which is just about to embark on a ten-day run it is certainly sure of itself.

The large cast is groomed to near perfection and the set is at a level of innovation and slickness rare for the amateur stage.

This musical demands much of its lead character, Tevye, the impoverished milkman of a poor village in 1905 Tsarist Russia. Donald Budge has a strong and sweet enough voice, as well as the stage presence, to take on the task of creating the feel-good elements of the opening scenes.

He is, it would seem, a forward thinking man as he allows his eldest daughter to marry for love - not in the marriage he arranged with the local butcher. As he bickers with his wife Golde (Norma Kinnear) who is more wedded to the old traditions of the village than he, there is a real sense of change in the air.

Such complexities would not work without a strong base, however, and from the opening number, Tradition, this is a company which is long on attention to detail.

Time and again in the big chorus numbers, such as the big wedding scene and the song Sunrise, Sunset, you can see individual members of the chorus and soloists taking their characters through the journey of the song. And they do so in a way which adds to the whole spectacle.

None are better at this than Tevye's five daughters. As a unit, they are superb. Rebecca Stenhouse and Danielle Cook might play the two youngest, but their dancing and singing are easily up to the level of their elder sisters as they create a sense of the family - and a youngster's intrigue in what their elders are up to.

Gaby Pavone is spot on as the eldest, Tzeitel. There is, you feel, a progressing stability as she rejects the butcher and takes an excellent James Dickson as the tailor, Motel, for her husband.

Where the production as a whole could do better is to find a greater feeling of the fear of the approaching pogroms which are driving the Jews out of Russia. While Katy Heney as number-two daughter Hodel and Ian McInnes as her lover, radical student Perchik, create romance - and sing superbly - there could be more bite to their characters.

By the time Claire Robertson as third daughter Chava, falls in love with Russian soldier, Sasha, there really should be more menace. This is, after all, a story with a tragic ending - a story of exodus and expulsion.

Such criticisms come easily, though, because so much else about the production is so good. The choreography, by David Paris who also appears for the more tricky pieces of Russian dance, is inventive and well timed. And the orchestra do find the drama within the music.

A strong production which, by seeking to entertain too much, does not quite find the dark heart of the play.

- Run ends January 29

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