



Duke is a grand evening out

The Grand Duke

Kings Theatre, Edinburgh

Thu 16 Mar 2006

Fast-paced and precisely-presented, the Gilbert and Sullivan Society of Edinburgh have taken one of the most unwieldy of the Savoy Operas and turned it into a fun evening out.

While Grand Opera was being serious at the end of the nineteenth century, Gilbert and Sullivan were busy providing light entertainment with a succession of popular hits.

But even by their own high standard of silliness, the plot for the final work they produced together was absurdly funny.

The operetta concerns a mythical Dukedom of Pfennig-Halb-Pfennig where Dumkopf, the director of a theatre company, is about to stage a coup. Once he has replaced the miserly Grand Duke with himself, Dumkopf promises to reward his cast with roles in government according to their position in the company.

Unfortunately the scheme is discovered when Ludwig, the company's comedian, is still loquaciously drunk from his own wedding breakfast to young chorus member Lisa. So, under the influence of a lawyer, the pair resort to the legal niceties of a Statutory Duel in order to escape certain death.

The curtain opens to a huge cast assembled on stage. While a little patience is required as the principles wind the unwieldy plot into motion, once it is underway the precision of the whole chorus singing and dancing in complete unison is one which would make many professional companies green with jealousy.

Neil French as Dumkopf, Scott Thomson as Ludwig and Barbara Brodie as Lisa all put in strong enough performances to make it work - although all three could happily let rip and try to command the stage just a little more. It takes the arrival of Fiona Main as leading lady, Julia, and Ian Lawson as the Grand Duke for that individual energy to appear.

Both Main and Lawson are able to hold the stage on their own. Lawson is particularly strong as he keeps the plot rolling along while simultaneously building up the comedy and letting the music do his talking. His freshly inserted topical gags are a real treat, too.

One of strengths of director, Alan Borthwick, is that he has had the guts to take Gilbert and Sullivan's final script and tear it up. In its place, he has reconstructed the much simpler plot which was planned before the pair's arguments spilled over into the libretto, with coded references to each other's foibles.

He also allows his principals to step forward and help the plot along in its most convoluted bits. Even if he does relish an Act Two curtain raiser as the scene shifts into Greek Costume which draws deserved applause, just for the audacity of existing.

The overall result is still not perfect. Indeed, the big finale really doesn't live up to the promises, either comedic or musical, of the opening numbers.

But even with its faults, the sheer panache of it all should please even the most puritanical G&S fanatic.

Run ends Saturday

Thom Dibdin