

APOLLO THEATRE, OXFORD, WELSH NATIONAL OPERA  
(March 22, 1984)

*THE MERRY WIDOW* (Lehar)

I do not know whether Michael Yeargen had Oxford's Apollo rather than Cardiff's New Theatre in mind when he designed the sets for this production but the fact is that the art deco style of the set was a perfect match to the Gaumont style of the theatre interior. These, in turn, were a perfect match to the high kitsch of Serban's production.

It was no less clever for being obvious of the producer to mount this operetta which is, for all its beauty, the height of kitsch itself, as a stylised visualisation of itself. And the epitome of this aesthetic is that supreme moment of the second act waltz which is both the emotional climax of the operetta and in this staging with its naked facetiously sentimental violinists the exactly right image.

Yes, of course there were moments when action on the busy stage unnecessarily caught the eye, but such moments were very much in the minority. On the whole this was a delightful production that was very much all of a part and presented with total conviction. The production was reminiscent, in its symbolism and stylisation, of Rouben Ter-Arturian's sets and costumes for *Die Liebe Der Danae* and, in its high-spirited deliberately obvious symbolism, close to the spirit of Peter Wood's *The Mother of Us All*.

Thomas Allen (Danilo), a striking singing actor, ad-lib'd his way delightfully through the evening thus bringing cast and orchestra into the fun. Suzanne Murphy may have lacked the 'charmant' winsomeness of 'echt Wien', but she brought her own brand of elegance and charm to this concept of the part of the Widow. I was struck by Robin Leggate (Camille)

whose Act 2 solo (a contrast in seriousness to the grotesquery of his characterisation) was rightly gripping . . . out of the mouth of clowns . . .

Not all of the cast was equally as successful. Julian Moyle as Njegus was obviously suffering with a throat ailment and Kate Flowers did not make the most of her characterisation of Valencienne.

Julian Smith's conducting charmed by insinuation rather than by frontal attack and after a slightly stiff start, his reading was flexible and winsome.

The diversity of the opinions of members of the audience, both pro and con, to be heard during the intervals at least indicated that the audience had been prompted to think about what they were seeing and hearing.

My experience has been that the wing of operetta has not always been caught by contemporary productions and I have the more all too frequently found myself sitting grumpily through the purile stage business that often passes for comedy in the opera house. But not this time. I sat smiling in delight all the way through. There was a totality of conception and a conviction about the presentation of this modernised classical kitsch myth (chocolate box Diana and Cupids) that I found convincing.

In short, a clever production, well performed and handsomely staged.

Finally, it is worth noting the superb production and value of the WNO programme. The printed programme was edited by Carole Strachan and designed by the Steve Allison Studio. Not only is the programme beautifully designed, but it is also full of interesting, relevant and well written information. A comprehensive critical discography is even included. There are far too many other organisations which charge more for programmes filled with puffery and advertisements. These latter may help pay the bills, but they do not help build an informed audience.