

Group: South Downe
Show: Chess
Venue: Ferneham Hall, Fareham
Director: John-Paul McCrohon
Musical Director: Alan Pring
Choreographer: Sara Harkness

The programme: The 16 page programme was very well designed and gave a good deal of information about the society and its members together with the background to the production. I like to see the pictures of principals with the individual personal information.

Costumes & Props: Costumes were appropriate throughout. The folk dance costumes for Merano were highly colourful and provided a suitable contrast to the black and white costumes of the chess players. The props were also suitable their movement completed by the cast and stage crew very efficiently so that it caused no break in continuity. Well done!

Lighting, Sound, Scenery & Set: The lighting effects were excellent throughout adding to the mood and atmosphere of the scenes; just a little more care when following characters across the stage. I am sure this will be rectified as the week progresses. I liked the use of the cameras, situated in the orchestra area, to project images onto the back screen. I realise it is difficult to synchronise movement when using this technique but thought it was very effective. The sound levels were well managed especially in the first half. In the second half the balance was not quite as good as both the microphone levels and the music seem to get louder. The overall scenery and set was very effective.

The Production: Overall a first class production with some really professional performances! I like the way chess moves were used when placing the chorus on the stage and thought all the dances were very well choreographed to suit the different scenarios. If this is the quality of performance for a first night, I think by the end of the week you will have a truly fantastic show.

Principals: Few mistakes made with excellent performances by "Florence", Sue Rourke, who captivated the audience as she portrayed all the moods and emotions of her character and "Anatoly", Paul Tully, in a role which really suited him and gave him the opportunity to show the range and quality both of his singing and acting. "Arbiter", Matt Sackman), too, lived his character and, like "Walter de Courcey", (Alan Jenkins) and "Molokov", (Danny Owen) sang superbly well, with excellent diction. All three managed to stay in character when they were not actively involved in proceedings. "Freddie", Steve Reading, worked extremely hard on his character and singing but found the vocal range difficult and at times the diction was less clear. The highlight for me was the duet between Florence and Svetlana (Jane Pegler), which had beautiful harmony, balance and dynamics.

Chorus: The chorus singing was generally very good and they certainly gave their all! At times there was a lack of balance in the part-singing were certain strong voices dominated and the word ending of phrases were not always together. Generally the full choruses often lacked clear diction.

Orchestra: For a large orchestra they managed to resist the temptation to blast and their playing, particularly in the solos and duets were wonderfully supportive. I loved the guitar solos. Excellent playing though throughout well controlled by Musical Director Alan Pring with just a need to watch the general sound level in the 2nd Act.

A very enjoyable evening and a short review will be placed on the NODA website.

John E Thomas