

PASSION IN A GLASS FOR LUCKY HIGHGATE

by

Ed Gordon in *Buzz*, the Highgate Society magazine

December 2008

Sitting in Upstairs at the Gatehouse greatly enjoying Hampstead Garden Opera's latest production, of Gaetano Donizetti's *Elixir of Love*, I thought how lucky we are to have this excellently run venue on our doorstep, with such an inspiring company to fill it. During the interval another Highgate Society member voiced a similar thought. The gratified reactions of the rest of the audience suggested many minds were working alike.

The intimacy of Upstairs at the Gatehouse brings constant new insights into familiar works. It adds an extra element to all performances there.

Recent Hampstead Garden Opera productions have impressed by their professionalism and inventiveness. The company's *Elixir of Love*, in a witty English translation by David Parry, was a succession of pleasures at many levels.

Bruno Ravella, as producer and director, had updated the action to a 20th century New York. He was well served by his set and costume designer, Madeleine Millar, and Daniel Harvey's lighting and Sarah Fahie's choreography.

Belcore, normally played as an army sergeant, became a slightly over-self-assured US Navy officer. Standing in for the indisposed alternate Belcore, Thomas Kennedy, Samuel Queen sang and acted the role excellently, with a nice line in disdainful curled lip and flared nostril, for a second successive night. Belcore's men (Ross Hobson, Martin Musgrave, Panos Ntourtoulis, Danny Smith) became US sailors, provoking recollections of modern works such as Bernstein's *On the Town*.

Stefanie Kemball-Read and Robin Bailey were in excellent voice, as Adina and Nemorino, respectively. Their acting evoked genuine concern about the fates of characters so often played as caricatures. As a result, the opera's best known aria, *Una furtiva lagrima* in the original Italian, fell appropriately in place for once. It can sometimes seem an unfittingly yearning intrusion into the comic plot.

Dulcamara was engagingly played by Philip Kay, in excellent voice, as a smooth, amoral, self-interested snake-oil salesman offering Nemorino 'passion in a glass'. Rebecca Dale was a pleasing Giannetta, a sensible foil to flighty Adina, raising echoes of another Bernstein piece, *West Side Story*. Alastair MacGeorge played an amusing cameo role as a gum-chewing, shades- and homburg-wearing, seen-and-done-everything-before attorney. The chorus acted with great conviction throughout, freezing to create memorable stage pictures during various set pieces involving the principals.

The Dionysus Ensemble under Oliver-John Ruthven played with great attack and verve.

Though the music and plot make enjoyment almost inevitable, characterization is rarely developed to the extent seen in this rewarding Hampstead Garden Opera version.

Any performance of *L'Elisir d'Amore* calls Sullivan to mind. Sullivan's musical satires in the Savoy operas are often as diverting as Gilbert's textual wit. Various 20th-century American lyricists and composers have acknowledged the major influence of Gilbert & Sullivan on their work. Hampstead Garden Opera's re-setting of Donizetti's *Elixir of Love* in 20th-century New York therefore created an intriguing circularity to season an already very fulfilling evening.