

# LIVE REVIEWS

## UK

### Thirst quenching

#### The Elixir of Love

Donizetti  
HAMPSTEAD GARDEN  
OPERA,  
UPSTAIRS AT THE  
GATEHOUSE,  
LONDON

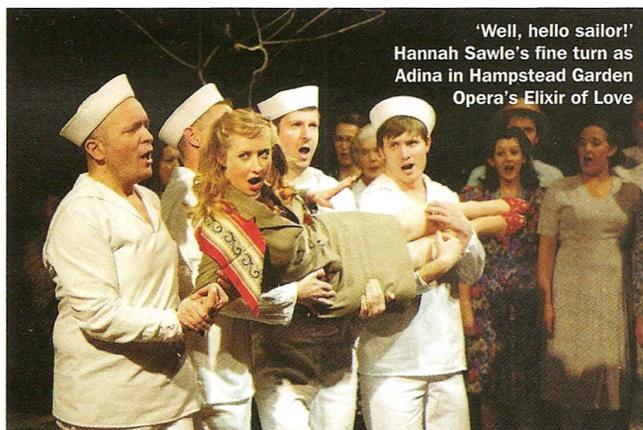
The ambitions of small, semi-professional opera companies rarely go beyond getting the right notes in the right order. Taking things from there to energised, coherent theatre with a bit of style is usually a hope too far. And I admit it wasn't a hope I carried in my heart to this modest, semi-production of Donizetti's *Elixir of Love* done in a room above a pub in Highgate.

But then I'd never before been to the venue called Upstairs at the Gatehouse, which is a more comfortable, less boxed-in space than I expected. And I'd never been to a show by Hampstead Garden Opera, which is really quite a deal.

Its amateur chorus – with an age-range spread probably across half a century – was oddly wonderful: impactful, strong, surprisingly well-disciplined. The 12-piece, young-professional orchestra was all those things and more, conducted with a brisk and competent alertness by the worryingly adolescent-looking Oliver-John Ruthven.

And the show itself was genuinely funny (for the right reasons, what's more), with a simple, fixed-set staging by Bruno Ravella that relocated Donizetti's Italian comedy to New York City in the 1940s, complete with just-docked sailors who'd apparently breezed in from *On The Town*.

Belcore was transformed from the usual macho soldier into a smooth lounge-lizard of a naval officer, sung by Samuel Queen with not too much voice but plenty of charm. Dulcamara, the purveyor



'Well, hello sailor!'  
Hannah Sawle's fine turn as  
Adina in Hampstead Garden  
Opera's *Elixir of Love*

LAURENT COMPAGNON

of love-potions, was a likeable spiv on a Heath-Robinson bicycle (Antoine Salmon). And Nemorino (Tom Cockett) became a busker – which allowed him to mime, with saxophone, the bassoon introduction to 'Una furtiva lagrima'. A nice touch.

None of these three soloists was there yet, vocally: I think they were still students. But Hannah Sawle's Adina was there in every sense: a brilliantly secure, capacious, fluent piece of singing that I'd never have thought to find in such circumstances. And that Hampstead Garden Opera could field so impressive a lead converted me to them for ever. Their next show, scheduled for April, will be a rare UK outing for Carlisle Floyd's *Susannah*. Ambitious or what?

MICHAEL WHITE

### Sweet treats

Hänsel und Gretel  
*Humperdinck*  
ROYAL OPERA HOUSE

Not seen at Covent Garden since 1937, *Hänsel und Gretel* made a popular return to the Royal Opera House in the tried and trusted hands of the directors Patrice Caurier and Moshe Leiser. And true to form, they captured precisely the blend of childish innocence threatened by something nasty in the woodpile; at times it's best to keep your eyes wide shut.

This pair of siblings live in drab surroundings with their mother Gertrud a dispirited Hausfrau yet again disappointed by her husband Peter coming home sloshed in the hopes of getting his leg over. The children are somewhat cowed, but have a natural exuberance that bubbles up and over. They all exist in a small and drab Ikea house, which has the benefit of keeping the action focused and forward, the deficit of providing nothing much to look at for Act I. Once the sprog hit the road, things live up scenically (sets by Christian Fenouillat), and the verdant forest looks refreshing and inviting until it all goes horribly wrong. But from our point of view, the worse it gets the better it gets, the ideas start flowing and suddenly the show kicks off. A sandman dwarf puts the children to sleep, and in a moving pantomime, they dream their hearts' desires as a slew of teddy bears with angels' wings warms them with a roaring hearth, and their parents, suddenly loving and giving, proffer enormous gift boxes, which, with layer after layer of wrapping, reveal the best present of all, a small sandwich. I confess to a tear. But once the Dew Fairy arrives, hideously cheerful in fairy princess frock and squirting Mr Muscle, things go from bad to better. The witch is a fabulously raddled old glamour queen, dextrous in steering her Zimmer frame and gleeful in her hoarding and baking of children, batches of