

# Hampstead Garden Opera's 'Albert Herring'

by Edmund Gordon

Rarely in a theatre have I found myself so comprehensively absorbed and rewarded as I was at Hampstead Garden Opera's recent 'Albert Herring'. Audience reaction and comments from friends suggest my reaction to the production was not exceptional. What made responses so uniformly favourable? Britten's music and Eric Crozier's exemplary libretto are obviously the foundations. The music, played expressively by the orchestra, was directed with great insight by Oliver-John Ruthven. Under his baton it was also sung beautifully and with conviction by all cast members (Simone Sauphanor (Lady Billows), Annette Dumville (Florence Pike), Caroline Kennedy (Miss Wordsworth), Shaun Aquilina (Rev. Gedge), William Bouvel (Mayor Upfold), Michael Pandazis (Supt. Budd), William Johnston Davis (Albert Herring), Jon Stainsby (Sid), Beth Moxon (Nancy), Heather Glansford Rowson (Mrs Herring), Harriet Burns (Emmie Splashett), Camilla Jeppeson (Cissie Woodger) and Fabian Tindall Geere (Harold Wood)). From comments by others and from attendance at a rehearsal the other cast (respectively Madeleine Bradbury Rance, Katie Hainbach, Joanne Watson, Laurence Williams, Jack Tebbutt, Chris Webb, Tom Moss, Nick Dwyer, Rosemary Clifford, Jessica Gillingwater, Esther Mallett, Sarah Killian and Lucas Evans) was equally commendable.

The success of an opera performance depends not just on how well the music is played and sung but on appropriateness of casting and standards of acting. Casting seemed to me exceptionally appropriate.

Character was believably conveyed by everyone, aided by the well considered and insightful production direction of Joe Austin and the costume design of Maira Vazeou, also responsible for the spare but telling set, effectively lit by Christopher Nairne.

Readers who did not attend a performance or experience similar fulfilment may be asking whether this abundance of superlatives can be justified. I approached the performance, and a previous rehearsal, with high expectations. HGO has so often delivered so much with such minimal resources. Rapture towards Britten's music however tends with me to be reserved. This was my third experience of 'Albert Herring'. My response to the first, a performance by the English Opera Group at Sadler's Wells with numerous celebrities in the audience, was equivocal. To the second, a production at the University of Colorado at Boulder attended after a 10-hour flight from London to Denver with a go-around in thick fog on first approach, it was positive. East Anglian and period overtones were unexpectedly accurately captured. Local and period social mores were equally well depicted by HGO but for me there was also a revelatory gain in appreciation of Britten's accomplishment in terms of the detail of the music, and the orchestration. Henry Royce, partner of Charles Rolls in the eponymous company, once said: 'Small things make perfection, but perfection is no small thing'. In HGO's 'Albert Herring' attention to small things by a gifted group resulted in a near perfect production.