

University of Nebraska win 49th Waterford International Festival of Light Opera

When the results were announced at the final night of the 49th Waterford International Festival of Light Opera, there seemed to be unanimous acclaim for the overall winner of the International Trophy, *The Most Happy Fellow* from University of Nebraska - Lincoln Opera and they won 5 other awards. Second was the highly fancied *Thoroughly Modern Millie* by Greenhills Variety Group, who also won 4 other awards. Third was *Follies* from Trent Opera, who also won 3 other awards. Fourth was Grand Hotel from Tustin's Troupe, Kent.

Nebraska's awards were for Best Sets, Best Choral Presentation (The 3 Chefs Abbondanza) Best Female Singer (Anna DeGraff for Rosabella), Best Male Singer (William Shomas as Tony), Best Musical Director, Tyler Goodrich White. Greenhills awards were for Best Choreographer, Laura Martin, Best Comedienne, Aoife Cartwright, who played Dorothy, Best Female Performer, Bronwyn Andrews as Millie, Best Comedian for a duo of Ronan O'Beirne and Derek Yeates as Ching Ho and Bun Foo. Trent Opera

won awards for Best Lighting, David Marsden. Best Costumes and Best Professional Director.

- The marking was as follows:
1. The Most Happy Fellow (180)
 2. Modern Millie (172)
 3. Follies (171)
 4. Grand Hotel (156)
 5. Jesus Christ Superstar (150)
 6. We Will Rock You (132)
 7. Bat Boy The Musical (123)
 8. The Mikado (115)
 9. Utopia Limited (112)



Pictured is Brian Mc Gee, Sales and Marketing Director, Waterford Crystal, presenting the Waterford International Festival of Light Opera Trophy to James E. Ford and Ariel Bybee co-directors of "The Most Happy Fellow" by University of Nebraska-Lincoln Opera winners of the 2007 Waterford International Festival of Light Opera. Also included are Sean Dower, Chairman, WIFLO, Fiona Shirran, President, AIMS, Cllr. Mary O' Halloran, Mayor and David Turner, Adjudicator.

John Power Photography

Reviews by Liam Murphy

Grand Hotel

An ensemble cast gathered in the foyer of the Grand Hotel in Berlin in the 1920s after the ravages of the First World War and sing and perform a story just over two days that links in a group of guests in a faded but rich hotel. The mood is a mixture of bitterness, sadness, regret, love, hate, birth and death and dying. A dying book-keeper Kringelein makes the point death is death but dying is still life.

Thus the very talented Jeremy Tustin brought to the Waterford festival his company, Tustin's Troupe, from Kent, England, to perform Grand Hotel in an evening of two hours without an interval. Not everybody's cocktail of delight or draught of morphine but it was an engrossing and thought-provoking production that had class, excellent performances and an ensemble unity that was always impressive.

A feature of this show was the previewing of events in history or life where the audience already knows what is or what can happen. This is a powerful dramatic device that goes back to before Shakespeare's Romeo And Juliet, where the opening poem tells the story of star-crossed lovers. Maury Yeston, who wrote the music and lyrics of Titanic The Musical, wrote several of the big story songs in Grand Hotel.

Even though there is a narrator, the Doctor who is scarred and bitter, the songs carry the development and explain. On the brink of Nazism, like in Cabaret (a show that Grand Hotel has been compared to) we meet an aging Russian ballerina; an impoverished romantic Baron; a dying Jewish book-keeper who is blowing his savings on a few days of lavish high-living. There's the heroine Flaemmchen (little Fire), a pregnant typist who dreams of a life in the movies in Hollywood but has to sell more than her body to achieve that. There's several other well defined characters and there's heartbreak and sadness.

In a strange poetic sense, this is a cyclic song and dance of death and love or should that be life and death? By the end you will have taken sides with some characters plight like, the bellhop who gets word that his wife has just given birth to a baby, but are you to feel hopeful about that? In a sense the show ends as it began and perhaps new lives and new stories will be told. Maybe, as one song says, Love Can't Happen.

A Bolero dance toward the end seems cramped and cluttered and the set lacked faded richness except for the shabby Theatre front tab. Six black flats did nothing for the setting except in some Brechtian justification.

Rachel Whittingham, as Flaemmchen, was excellent as the innocent but ambitious young typist. She caught the mood so well and you felt like shouting Stop when she stepped out of her knickers for

the lecherous businessman. Fiona Hannon was a glorious Ballerina. David Jefferson, a cynical and bitter Doctor, was just right for the work. Matthew Walker was a fine Kringelein as was Martin Peacock's businessman as was Sarah Buckley's Raffaella. Andrew Stansall was wonderful as the Baron.

Josh Tye and Matthew Owen were a delight as the two Jimmies. The Doctor's cynical lines at the end caught the mood as well - always the same - people come, people go, one life ends while another begins, one heart beats faster while another breaks - always the same.

It saddened me as I left the theatre to hear people say if there had been an interval they would have left Grand Hotel.

In his adjudication David Turner explained the characters in this fine ensemble piece. He described the opening as amazing with lots to see and absorb, not an easy piece of entertainment. He liked the tight direction, the dance sequences, the musical direction, the relentless score, the basic but successful scenery. And he praised a long list of characters and told a wonderful theatrical story of being at an American production of the show.

The Most Happy Fellow

The University of Nebraska - Lincoln Opera - on their second visit to Waterford Opera Festival brought a most wonderful, The Most Happy Fella. This was the most happy and exhilarating production that just got better and better. There were moments and passages in the show that were most magical and most beautiful.

The Frank Loesser musical tells a romantic story of Napa Valley wine grower, Tony who is an older man, and on a visit to Frisco sees and falls in love with a waitress in a restaurant. He leaves her his tiepin and a love note written on a menu. Sh, Rosabella, sends a picture of herself and they exchange love letters. But he sends her a photo of his younger foreman who is supposed to be moving on.

Tony proposes marriage by letter and Rosa accepts and arrives in Napa but meets the foreman when Tony has a near death accident and marries Rosa on his deathbed as Act One ends. When Act Two opens Tony is in a wheelchair and love deepens between them. Rosa discovers she is pregnant by the foreman and in a whirlwind of rage, Tony sets out to shoot his rival but love prevails in the most wonderful apple-pie love-in-your-eye finale.

The show swept me away on the most wonderful surge of love and romance. I loved every scene and marvelled at the quality in every aspect of the production. The set was great and detailed and made the work so believable and realistic. The props were detailed and effective as were costumes and lighting. A wonderful

chorus number had amazing stillness and impact - Song Of A Summer Night. The choreography was impressive and the comedy routines were excellent.

Ariel Bybee and James E. Ford co-directed. Tyler Goodrich White conducted and Laurel Showmaker designed the settings.

William Shomas was amazing as Tony and his fine operatic voice just filled the theatre. He created such emotional responses. This was the performance of the festival (so far). His little asides to his Momma in heaven were tender and honest and his big duets with Rosa had such passion and strength, especially How Beautiful The Days and My Heart Is So Full Of You.

Michael Tully was a fine Foreman. Natalie Tavlin and excellent comedienne as Cleo and her routines with Jonathan Yarrington's, Herman, were a triumph for them both. Anna De Graff was tender and so impressive as Rosabella. Adam Fieldson, Jane Bartlett and Thom Gunter were wonderful chefs in Abbondanza.

I left the theatre, the most happy fella, and played the cd to my heart's delight. This could be the winner, my heart says.

In his adjudication, David Turner was full of praise for the natural voices with no mics. He loved the many technical aspects and details, the attention to plotting and direction, the emotional range of the work, the big dance/chorus scenes, the duets that told of love and disappointment. He praised the interpretation of the score, the four part harmonies, and exceptional singing in an almost sung-through opera.

He described the role of Tony as being the show and he listed a range of impressive aspects to that role. Praise was the order of the night.

Follies

Trent Opera provided the last competitive show for the 49th Festival of Light Opera with an impressive and thought-provoking Stephen Sondheim's Follies. This is a complicated cycle of memory and what was and what might have been from 1971 when it opened at the Winter Garden Theatre, New York. Based loosely on the famous Zigfeld Follies, the fictional Weismann Follies, gather on the stage of a derelict, soon to be demolished (for a carpark) theatre for a first and last reunion of mostly showgirls going back thirty years.

For long periods, this impressive company, and it takes great resources and talent to take on a musical that does not have a feel-good factor, failed to lift the performance out over the footlights. Memories got in the way as did expectations and there was a great expectation that this show would be a winner, and in its ironic way, that is what the work is about, memories and disappointments captured in the song The Road You Didn't Take.

For me, my memories were confused and mostly sad, gone

was the buzz and spectacle of past festivals; would there be a 50th Festival, and what would the Royal be like when it re-opened in 2009. I kept seeing the late Paddy Giles among the guests at the show and this slipped into private memories of Absent Friends - a very theatrical toast to the past.

The central story is of two showgirls, Sally (she has most of the big numbers) and Phyllis who married two stage door Johnnies way back then. Ben, a new rich and famous diplomat, married Phyllis after a brief but memorable fling with Sally. Buddy, a travelling salesman with a girl in every hotel it seems, married Sally and she is convinced she made a mistake; four sad, unhappy, people at a reunion, where they meet their younger selves in flashback (a wonderful theatrical device). Their reminiscences and recriminations are mixed with flashes and flashbacks of other ex-Follies. Much of this is pastiche of shows past and most of the second half is set in a gloriously glitzy and transformed theatre for a series of burlesque acts recreating the magic of the Weismann Follies with Ben and Buddy as performers. These scenes are laden with irony about the folly or foolishness of youth and love. Songs like You're Gonna Love Tomorrow, Love Will See Us Through, God-Why-Don't-You-Love-Me Blues, Losing My Mind and the powerful Live Laugh Love, when you feel that you cannot live, laugh or love. A very unsettling ending.

Part of the American attraction of this show was the use of older stars in key roles like Yvonne De Carlo banging out I'm Still Here or Ethel Shutta's show-stopping Broadway Baby.

For Trent Opera, Andrew Nicklin directed and conducted brilliantly. Jackie O'Brien amazed with her choreography and the costumes were lavish and stunning. Sharon Cutworth was older Sally and she sang and acted with skill and style. Charlotte Clement was Young Sally. Philip Fry was a smouldering volatile Buddy and Luke Walker was an innocent Young Buddy. Lorna Harrington was excellent as older Phyllis and a beautiful Jessica Nicklin caught the Young Phyllis to perfection. Simon Theobald was so impressive



Anna De Graff who plays the part of Rosabella in 'The Most Happy Fellow', a production by University of Nebraska-Lincoln Opera at this year's WIFLO.

and so powerful as Ben - his Live Laugh Love - was exceptional. Jason Reynolds caught the dreams, hopes and passion of Young Ben.

In his adjudication, David Turner spoke of anticipation, of something special and of different styles.

He shared thoughts of theatrical gatherings and end of show parties. He praised the lavish costumes, the showgirls, the stark and then

transformed theatre, the glitzy scenery, the musical interpretation, the dramatic highpoints. There was lots of praise for principals and a sad story to end about memory and memories, the illusion and delusion, of life imitating theatre and vice versa.

The story was about Olive Gilbert who always came to the stage after shows to say goodbye and thank you to the empty auditorium and empty theatre.

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On 6th and 7th November the two magnificent productions of Carmen and Nabucco arrive at the University Concert Hall. With a large cast and the full Chisinau National Philharmonic Orchestra and chorus, this will be Ellen Kent's premiere tour of Ellen Kent productions which have been produced, directed and co-ordinated by Ellen Kent herself creating a new company to tour Britain and Ireland.

Bizet's masterpiece, Carmen, is a vividly colourful and passionate production. Carmen is inspired by Ellen Kent's years in Andalucia as a teenager with a lot of the scenes based more on Malaga than Seville including a colourful group of gypsy dancers.

Verdi wrote this opera as a cry against the tyranny of the world and for freedom for all those who are oppressed by tyrants. We have included some amazing stage pyrotechnics for the burning down of the temple, the collapsing God and for the scene where Nabucco goes mad. Here is your chance to win tickets to see both Carmen and Nabucco!

The Prize is a pair of tickets to see Carmen on 6th November, a bottle of Russian Methode Champagne and a glossy souvenir programme plus a pair of tickets to see Nabucco on 7th November, a bottle of Russian Methode Champagne, an informative opera book, and a glossy souvenir programme. On both nights you will stay in a double B&B room at Jurys Inn Limerick. 3 Runners up prizes include pairs of tickets to see Carmen on 6th November with a glossy, souvenir programme.

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Text MUNSTER followed by a space and the answer and your name to 57050 or phone 1516 400 930

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