

Titanic The Musical – Chelmsford Amateur Operatic Society

Performed on Saturday 29 September 2012 at the Civic Theatre, Chelmsford

Director – Ray Jeffery, Musical Director – Patrick Tucker

In Greek mythology the Titans were a race of giant gods that ruled the Earth until overthrown by Zeus and his fellow Olympians. They were banished to live in Tartarus, a place deep beneath Hades itself. Whether or not Bruce Ismay, Chairman of The White Star Line, knew this derivation of the word is unknown; but Titanic carries with it not just the clear suggestion of epic scale but also that of being vanquished ultimately by a greater power. The audience's foreknowledge of the Titanic's fate and that of most of its passengers and crew does seem to suffuse the entire theatrical experience with a sense of sadness. This becomes compounded by the awareness of your own impotence, as you watch a confluence of events unfolding which, if you could only intervene, could stop the tragedy occurring or at the very least save more lives.

It is a curious feeling when you find yourself analysing the situation and willing the story to have a different ending as if by telepathy you could change the actor's lines. These alternating and contrasting feelings of detachment from and engagement with the action on stage placed me firmly outside the fourth wall always aware of watching a musical production. As a consequence I could appreciate and applaud the fantastic spectacle that was before me but I rarely found myself so absorbed that my response was an emotional one, despite the superb quality of the production. The one exception was the moment when Gill Plumtree's Ida Strauss told her husband she would not leave him on the ship to die alone, after forty years of marriage.

Perhaps the show's scope and scale, while still keeping to a two and a half hour running time, simply doesn't allow enough time for characterisation to develop. With a cast of sixty five souls, twenty three scenes with thirty three songs including the reprises it becomes more obvious that dialogue is restricted to that which is sufficient to move the story along. Such characterisation that did emerge was restricted to the Captain, Andrews and Ismay on the bridge, Major Butt in first class and Alice and Edgar Beane in second class. And this was almost certainly in direct proportion to the number of lines they had.

Musically, especially the opening 20 minutes including the Overture, as well as Lady's Maid, and the songs by Barrett and Bride, Titanic was gorgeous and the orchestra, conducted by Patrick Tucker, conveyed all the romanticism and majesty of a glorious film score. The opening scenes set the tone for a production of great quality. The volume of sound from sixty five pairs of lungs, at that time full of optimism for the future that lay ahead in America, was truly uplifting. This was a show that gave the men most of the opportunities and the assembled throng from societies all around the south of England made for a magnificent line up. While the singing from relative newcomers to CAODS, such as Rob James (Barrett), Dan

Looney (Bride), Mick Wilson (the Captain) and Oli Budino (Frederick Fleet) was excellent I must mention regular members John Sullivan (Thomas Andrews) and Kevin Abrey (Etches) who gave nothing to the others in terms of quality vocals. It was also good to see Barry Hester return to the Civic stage as J. Bruce Ismay. His altercations with the Captain were powerful and his singing with Andrews and the Captain in *The Blame* equally so.

The ladies had less to do but they certainly looked the part with the most stunning costumes, wigs and hats. They may be similar to costumes seen in other shows but the sheer quantity of them was a great spectacle. *Lady's Maid* (see above) was one of the highlights for the women and showcased some delightful Irish accents and fresh-faced colleens. Diana Baker (Alice Beane) added much needed comedy with her social climbing busybody persona and Gill Plumtree (Ida Strauss) still has the ability to command the stage.

Technically this may have been complex, with so many scene changes, gauzes and special effects but the pace was always good and the occasional use of the traveller to hide what has happening behind, worked well. The effect of the set in the opening scene on the dockside, with the huge riveted steel plates, was extremely effective and the rapid shifts to the insets, such as the bridge, the boiler room, radio room, cabins etc all were smooth. The use of the inclined rostra and stanchions in Act 2 was sufficient to create the effect of the listing ship and the runaway trolley was a clever but effective way to bang home that point. Attention to detail was excellent, with the life preservers and Carpathian blankets being very worthwhile additional props. The sound effect of the ship scraping the iceberg at the end of Act One was gut-wrenchingly realistic.

CAODS' *Titanic the Musical* lived up to its name in so many ways and was produced and directed in such a fashion that the finished result was a fitting tribute to the memory of the passengers and crew on the centenary of the original tragedy. The bringing together of a cast of sixty five people was in itself an event to be commended with many new friendships forged and new aspirations encouraged. However, despite having successfully embarked on this voyage the once I wonder whether CAODS will ever again consider a return trip or be content, like the Gods of Olympus, to banish *Titanic* to the metaphoric equivalent of Tartarus?

Reviewer – Stewart Adkins

Regional representative, District 8

NODA East