

HIGH JINKS IN HADES

1979

HIGH jinks in Hades is how one might sum up Offenbach's Orpheus In The Underworld. Chelmsford Amateur Operatic and Dramatic Society's autumn offering at the Civic Theatre all this week.

And, after a disappointing first act, Ray Jeffery's production really takes off and brings out the colour and excitement inherent in this lively oldie of a musical.

The story line of Orpheus In The Underworld is very artificial telling how King Pluto comes up to Earth from Hades disguised as Aristaeus, to take off Eurydice, wife of Orpheus, and gets into trouble with another Dirty Old Man, Jupiter, as a result.

The first act is especially artificial and Mr Jeffrey's mannered approach only heightens the artificiality.

But the second act, set on Mount Olympus, and the third act set in Hades, enable him to introduce those amusing visual effects and exciting dance routines for which his productions are justly famous.

COMMANDING

Of the individual performances that of Neil Michael as Pluto is the most commanding in effect. Fortunate enough to have the right build and physical characteristics for the role Mr Michael is also the possessor of a fine resonant voice and a powerful stage presence.

As Eurydice, Gay Jackson sings with confidence, being one of the female singers who rides over the at times heavy textured but always lively account musical director Ian Hayter obtains of Offenbach's lively score.

There are touches of delicious ironies in her spoken lines, a quality also to be found in Dianne Henry's Venus, who twists Jupiter round her little finger.

Peter Smith struck me as a rather surprising piece of casting for Jupiter, but he does a first rate job with the character, managing to create a facade of authority, which, thanks to the shopfloor discontent of the other gods and goddesses looks pretty paper thin at times.

There is more to the role of Juno than Phyl Hart brings to it and Sally Lorkin's Cupid needs to be more gossamer like, but Lynette Bendall makes the most of her limited opportunities of Ameryllus, Juno's girl friend.



Pluto (Neil Michael) and Venus (Dianne Henry) in a scene from Orpheus In The Underworld.

Dudley Smith looks suitably warlike as Mars, Bert Simpson is a resigned Vulcan and Simon Fisher's Mercury is a delight, being witty both aurally and visually.

Christine Young's Diana is absolutely captivating from start to finish, and Graham Jones makes Styx a figure of pathos which introduces an effective change of mood in act three.

Although the name part, the role of Orpheus, is not an especially rewarding one, Patrick Tucker sings with rounder tone than I have ever heard before, and convinces as a man, only too anxious to get rid of his wife, but too much under Mum's thumb to do so.

His mother, Calliope, should carry all before her until Jupiter's final trick in the operetta's closing moments, but Jenn Clements doesn't give the impression she is doing this.

Two other attractive cameos come from Christine Shead as Icarus and Roy Parrat as Bacchus Eurydice's final choice a suitor.

There is a lot of attractive music in Orpheus In The Underworld, escapist entertainment if ever there was and in this production the waltz number, Mortal Below, Gods Up Above and the act three quintet, Chez La Femme are the best candidates for showstoppers, along of course with the famous Can Can dance.

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