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Billy Budd – The Grand, Leeds

Posted by: The Reviews Hub - Yorkshire & North East in Drama, North East & Yorkshire, Opera, Review 23 hours ago 0

Music: Benjamin Britten

Libretto: E.M. Forster

Director: Orpha Phelan

Conductor: Garry Walker

Reviewer: Sue Collier

This Opera North production of *Billy Budd* is in two acts and is based on the short story *Billy Budd* by Herman Melville.

The story is set in 1797, at a time when the French are revolting and there is great enmity between Britain and France. Billy Budd is press-ganged into service as an Able Seaman on board the HMS Indomitable. Life on board is often brutal, but Billy is hardworking and loyal. He has an acceptance of his position in life and wants to do his best to serve his master, Captain Vere.

Billy is a simple, pleasant and friendly young man who is illiterate and has a stammer. He is very popular with his peers and with Captain Vere, who recognises his abilities. The Master of Arms John Claggart attempts to prove to Captain Vere that Billy is a revolutionary/mutineer.

The role of Vere is played by Alan Oke, who in the prologue gives a great soliloquy. There is a beautiful, yet eerie orchestral accompaniment and a terrific set. Oke shows us Vere's true emotions, and when he realises his role in Billy's downfall, his swooning distress is palpable.

Of particular note in this production, is the fabulous array of naval costumes used to portray the class system on board the ship and the position of power attributed to each character. One certainly gains a true perspective of the expression 'motley crew' as some of the sailors look appropriately unkempt and the cast offers a strong sense of futility.

Opera North always offer good staging and the lighting is always appropriate, never overdone and sets the story well. The beginning of Act Two effectively portrays the entire crew waiting to attack a French naval vessel and at this point their excitement can almost be physically felt by an appreciative audience.

The likable Billy is played by Roderick Williams, who gives a surprisingly confident aspect to Billy's nature. William's singing during the scene where Billy waits for his execution is first class. Of some concern, is that the audience laughed loudly during the scene where Billy strikes Claggart. This feels somewhat uncomfortable and maybe additional attention could work to improve the strength of emotion during this scene.

As the story is void of female characters, a terrific thirty-six strong male chorus provides a wonderful sound and give a real impression of the sailor's lifestyle. There are possible references to Brexit related themes "I don't like the French. It's England for me" and humour with instructions of "...never mind the singing". The beautifully emotional singing is faultless and is complemented by Garry Walker's wonderful conducting style, although during Act One there are occasional moments when the singers seem slightly overpowered by the orchestra.

This production of *Billy Budd* is truly enjoyable and had an appreciative audience. It is highly recommended.

Reviewed on: 18 October 2016 | Image: Clive Barda