

Fiddler on the Roof – CAODS

Performed at Civic Theatre, Chelmsford, February 25, 2010

Director – Ray Jeffery, Musical Director – Stuart Woolner

I was surprised at the relative lack of spectacle, technical wizardry and general stage magic that we have become used to at CAODS. Once I became acclimatised to the simplicity of the constant backdrop of village houses, perhaps even caricatures of houses, with a very large expanse of sky above it, I settled in and was able to let the music and dialogue speak for itself. This was a very “clean” production in some ways – no dirty clothes and faces for this peasant people – but it strove for authenticity in others – plenty of superstitious spitting and the rather tiresome pronunciation of Sabbath as Shabbatt/Shabbas. This cleanliness continued with the use of simple large props (table, cupboard or bed for the inside of Tevye’s house, the village well, the inn, a station halt etc) thus allowing plenty of room for what was a very large cast. The ambience created was thus one of spaciousness, even isolation, conveying the twin messages of hardship and community. This worked particularly well when Tevye had the stage to himself, pulling his milk cart and talking to God, with no distractions. It also worked well when Hodel and Tevye waited at the station halt in what was obviously a bleak, cold and desolate place. The lighting plot was excellent, combining bold colour backdrops or snowstorms for the sky as well as focused spots and down lighting on freezes and song/scene endings.

The singing could not be faulted and the large cast, split between Papas, Mamas, Sons and Daughters, created a wonderful wall of sound that seemed very natural, with perhaps less need for amplification than usual. This allowed for an excellent balance between stage and orchestra, which meant that the orchestra was not intrusive and simply blended in. The movement of such a large cast was also good, with Tradition and Sunrise Sunset both being outstanding. The principals were well cast for acting age, compatibility and vocal skills. Tevye was superb with a resonant voice that sang beautifully but which also had a rumbling ethnic authenticity. His characterization was also excellent, providing a lightness of touch that generated plenty of humour but which also evoked enormous sadness. The humour came through without undermining the sensitivity of the “engagement” scenes and was most obvious after “The Dream”. The sadness at its extreme, provoking an almost unanimous audience grab for the Kleenex, was Tevye’s rejection of Chava. When Chava was dragged along the ground by Tevye’s cart the emotion was almost too much to bear.

Space does not allow much comment on the rest of the cast but Golde was a shrewish foil for Tevye and her handling of Chava’s disappearance and Tevye’s rejection of her was extremely good. Each of the three singing girls was strong and well cast as were their partners. Motel played the weedy tailor well and provided a strong contrast with the headstrong Perchik. Lazar Wolfe, Yente, Grandma Tzeitel and Fruma Sarah all completed a strong cast of major principals. This was an excellent production that succeeded on the strength of its cast and the underlying story. Who needs spectacle and stage trickery when the rest of the ingredients are in place?

Reviewer – Stewart Adkins

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