

Chess - Chelmsford Amateur Operatic and Dramatic Society at the Civic Theatre
(25th September)

Review by Cheryl Rogers

The story of Chess is set at the world chess championship during the time of the Cold War. It involves a romantic triangle between two top players, an American and a Russian, and the woman who manages one and falls in love with the other. At the same time, both the United States and the Soviet Union are using every possible subterfuge to win international chess tournaments for propaganda purposes. So, this is quite a difficult and complex story to follow as a rock opera and explains why Chess does not always appeal to a wide audience. However, those who know the show, and more importantly the music, were in for a treat with this CAODS production.

The whole piece relies on the strength of the principal characters and to get a cast as strong as this one was nothing short of a miracle for an amateur society. Their team comprised John Escott as Frederick Trumper, who both sang and acted the part of the volatile American champion with conviction, turning in a lovely performance of the emotional and difficult 'Pity The Child' number. Then there was Gareth Barton who managed to portray the contrasting character of Anatoly Sergievsky, the Russian, to great effect. The tormented man was brought to life by this excellent performer whose portrayal was top notch and whose voice is superb. Sarah Barton, who played Florence Vassy, the woman at the heart of this musical, completed the trio and stole the show with her beautiful voice. She was totally believable as Florence, drawing out the vulnerability of the character and executing every song to perfection – stunning.

Other performances very worthy of mention were Diana Baker as Svetlana Sergievsky, a complete contrast to Florence, with *very* impressive Russian dialogue! John Sullivan, who presented a fine portrayal in both voice and character of the Russian Molokov and Ben Martins, the Arbiter, a good looking young man in immaculate evening dress (providing the 'eye candy' for the female audience).

The civil servants were funny and completely in unison and the band was pure rock. The only thing that I, personally, didn't care for were the chorus scenes. Now there isn't much chorus work in Chess but the opening of both acts in my opinion should be vibrant and lively. Instead I found 'Merano' lifeless and 'One Night In Bangkok' lacklustre, with the dancers having the only real movement. This was a pity as the vitality of these scenes should set the mood of the following story. Also, disappointingly a lot of the lyrics of the songs couldn't be heard and in a show like this with no real spoken dialogue, this is essential to follow the plot. However, I heard that it depended on where you were sitting in the theatre, so perhaps that was the fault of the acoustics or sound balance, but it was at times, quite frustrating. Luckily the pleasure of once more watching this show overcame any negative aspects, it was a first rate evening at the theatre! The songs are still playing over in my mind two days later.

Photograph by Christopher Yorke - Edwards