

## Watford Observer

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# Princess Ida at Watford Palace Theatre\*\*\*

*5:10pm Monday 18th January 2010*

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Among the operettas of Gilbert and Sullivan, Princess Ida makes special demands. It is based on Tennyson's poem *The Princess*, written in 1847, which was greatly admired in the 19th Century, but is wearisome today. Uniquely, following Tennyson, Gilbert wrote in blank verse. But amateur operatic singers are not all necessarily skilled blank verse speakers.

Katherine Littler, takes the lead as the princess in her first big role and looked well in the part of principal of an all-women university; she has a good voice and reliable technique. In the hope that she will continue in this sort of work, we shall look forward to great things. She plays the daughter of King Gama, who eventually marries Hilarion, giving up her feminist cause.

Gilbert uses this story to ridicule the emancipation of women. The scene in which a young woman doctor confesses herself too faint-hearted to practise, written at just the time when a relation of mine qualified as one of the first women doctors, is now just embarrassing. The jokes about Darwin and Bowdler fell flat. So, ingeniously, a brief prologue and epilogue are added to this production, presenting the work as no more than a bedtime story for children. But this undermines Gilbert's sort of humour, which works best if there is an underlying seriousness – as in, say, *Iolanthe*, which is emphatically mock-heroic.

Sullivan's music is, indeed, humorously reminiscent of the greats - Handel and Wagner, for instance. For me, the high point was the quintet in Act II, *The woman of the wisest wit*, sung by Emma Louise Stratton (as Lady Psyche), Jennifer Carr, Martin Rhodes (as Hilarion), Russell Stratton and Gareth Edwards. A special word must be said for Graham Jackson, clowning as the misanthropic King Gama. The excellent chorus was vital to the performance, and the orchestra, directed by Phillip Joslin, rendered convincingly both Sullivan's passages of high seriousness and the accompaniments to the patter songs. So, lovers of G & S, if you miss this, you should be sorry.

**Graham Mordue**

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