

CALENDAR GIRLS

Cheltenham Operatic and Dramatic Society

The Playhouse Theatre Cheltenham

Saturday 22nd September 2012

In the (rephrased) words of William Blake, *“I will not cease from mental fight, nor shall my sword sleep in my hand, till we have driven the scourge of leukemia from England’s green and pleasant land.”*

Thus inspired, the ladies of the Knapely W.I. passionately resolve that Annie’s tragic husband John will be respectfully remembered after his untimely death. Their story, famously inspired by real-life events in Rylstone, North Yorkshire, becomes the stuff of legend: a nude calendar that will raise funds to combat this dreadful, wasting disease, and buy a commemorative sofa for a local hospital.

Displaying equally brave determination, Cheltenham Operatic and Dramatic Society engage spiritedly with Tim Firth’s touching stage adaptation of the 2003 feature film. From the outset, there is comedy, warmth and pathos in abundance, right down to the sensitive music which accompanies the cascade of letters of appreciation. Amidst all the joy, however, lies a mordant sadness, and between the gales of laughter, the poignant silences of shared grief grasp at the very soul.

Yet there is an abiding, almost tangible, sense of hope, and in a gold-plated case of *“We shall overcome”*, girl power rules OK. Spearheaded by brash Celia and feisty Chris, their great humanitarian crusade steadily gathers momentum. Inhibitions evaporate, the moment of truth arrives, and the calendar shoot itself is simply electrifying; each of the courageous ladies is wildly and justly applauded as they strike their daring poses, and the crowning Christmas tableau is unforgettable. What a nation we are when we’re stirred.

Singling out individual performances in a cast whose every character is strong and real seems unfair; ultimately triumphant here are CODS themselves, upon whom the countenance divine has indeed shone forth. Jerusalem is builded here this week at the Playhouse in an uplifting production that is as rich as plum jam, and fully deserving of the first-night ovation which was as resonant as the bells of Ripon cathedral. Make a date, wear a sunflower and prepare to shed a tear or two. Of such tales are heroes made.

Simon Lewis