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Professional support
for amateur theatre

CHELTENHAM OPERATIC AND DRAMATIC SOCIETY

Avenue Q

The Playhouse, Cheltenham

October 2nd 2013

Director: Stephen Santouris

Choreographer: Sophie Constantine

Vocal Coach: Beverley Whitaker

I really did not know what to expect of this production as I had received several warnings of strong language and naughty goings on. I can see that people might be offended, but there were plenty of warnings, and if you approached it with an open mind, great fun. The show also has a more serious side exploring such issues as racism and homosexuality, and the everyday problems that most people face, finding a place to live, a job, and generally that life is not as easy as we have been led to believe. The curtains opened to reveal a colourful picture book set of a street, with several houses, which made an instant impact. The main set had been extremely well designed and constructed, with many practical doors and windows, all of which appeared to have been weighted as they closed smoothly, with a hinged section to reveal the interior of a house. Other items were brought on as required. Much attention had been paid to set dressing and props. The lighting helped to create the right atmosphere and there were some well controlled cross fades. The special lighting effects for the silhouetted figures at the windows, was very effective. This is a very different show and technically challenging, as eleven of the fourteen characters are puppets, which are operated and voiced by visible people. To add to the difficulties several of the puppets require two operators working together both visible and moving all over the stage. On stage all the interaction and focus is between the puppets with operators being ignored, and the audience are expected to focus on the puppets too. The three 'humans' interacted brilliantly with the puppets, and as they were larger than life characters, fitted in well. I think this show can be performed in one of two ways, with those operating and vocalising the puppets being completely blank or, as in this production, taking on the character of the puppet. I thought at first I might find it a distraction to see the operators so clearly, but I began to believe it was the puppets who were performing on their own. Rehearsing with the puppets is vital and the company worked with a rehearsal set for three weeks and the production puppets for a further two weeks before the show opened. The cast had worked very hard to operate the puppets so smoothly, especially those requiring two operators. The company had decided to use an official backing track for the show. Vocal coach Beverley Whitaker had done an excellent job teaching the musical numbers, for although they had worked with the music from day one there

was no one to bring them in or rescue them if there was a problem. The singing was of a very high standard. Choreographing puppets must have presented some interesting challenges to Stephanie Constantine, but everyone coped very well, I particularly liked the troupe of cardboard boxes. This is the sort of show for which the director has to have a real passion and Stephen Santouris certainly had that. To rehearse your cast in one venue and then transfer to the performance space is difficult enough, but to add the complication of puppets, and keep cheerful and enjoy it, shows dedication. This show relies so much more than usual on the audience being able to believe in what is presented to them; and perhaps it works because we have a long history of puppetry and are accustomed to seeing puppets being outrageous, as with Punch and Judy. The audience the evening I was there were very amused, but also very sympathetic to the characters. This production worked well in the more intimate venue of the Playhouse. Congratulations to everyone involved in this memorable production, it was a major team effort and all your hard work paid off.

Frankie Telford
Regional Representative. District 15.

National Operatic and Dramatic Association

15 The Metro Centre, Peterborough PE2 7UH

Tel 01733 374 790 **Fax** 01733 237 286 **Email** info@noda.org.uk **Web** www.noda.org.uk

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