

# National Operatic & Dramatic Association

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## London Region



Society : Stage One Youth  
Production : **THEY SHALL GROW NOT OLD**  
Date : Saturday 15<sup>th</sup> November 2014  
Venue : Desborough Suite, Maidenhead  
Report by : Gordon Bird, NODA Representative, Area 14

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### Report

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I was very delighted to be invited to watch Stage One Youth's latest production. Normally I have the luxury of either knowing the show I am about to review or have managed to prepare by doing some research. However, this production was something different in that the first half was a compilation of poems, sketches and songs from the era of the First World War whilst the second was a newly written one act play. It meant I had the pleasure of seeing something for the very first time

The productions were thought provoking, entertaining and exceptionally well rehearsed as I have now come to expect from this talented group.

The first half was presented in the style of an old time music hall with a compère (**DANIEL EMBLETON**) who confidently introduced the audience to each of the items. He competently delivered each piece with an interesting fact or nugget of fascinating information. His voice was clear and engaged very well with the audience, and probably would have been even more engaging if he had learnt all of the lines. However, given the number of items, and the mass of information he had to reveal, I think having the facts to hand was a very sensible approach. Importantly, it was not a distraction to his fine performance. I did feel, however, that Daniel could have waited a few moments before getting up to introduce the next item. Obviously the show was very well rehearsed but the compère could afford to use the time of the applause to get up rather than before the applause. This is a very small point and I only mention it because I felt it was slightly distracting. On the whole, however, Daniel gave us a controlled, engaging and confident compère.

The cast commenced with a lively rendition of *Oh It's A Lovely War*, with simple but very effective movement. The three lines produced some interesting movements and I did like the "marching" style of movement that set the military theme of the evening.

A scene for George Bernard Shaw's *Pygmalion* followed. A picture of Edwardian drawing room was projected onto the backcloth that helped set the scene. Chairs and table, rug and a gramophone set down stage right also aided in setting the location. Mics ensured that all the voices carried. Each of the four actors (**ELLIE BULLEN, MARTHA MACKAY-PARDOE, OLIVER JAMES & ZAC ABBOTT**) portrayed their characters distinctively, The stuffy maid was very well presented with good posture that would have been seen of that era. Zac's aloof PROFESSOR HIGGINS was ably performed and Oliver offered a good foil as his friend. I was impressed the characterisation of ELISA who was consistent in her use of her accent and portrayed nice mannerisms and very good control of her wailing! Direction – A small point but I would have thought HIGGINS should have been nearer to ELISA when he says "that is your sleeve" to emphasis, especially as she has been using her sleeve to wipe her nose.

The popular British *Roses of Picardy*, written by Frederick Weatherly with music by Haydn Wood, was wonderfully sung by **MATTHEW HARCOURT** – who has excellent rich tone for one so young. He has very good voice control and the movement was well directed, just the right amount of movement to reposition for each verse. Not only did Matthew sing the song very well indeed, but he acted out the song with wonderful facial expressions. The follow spot and his uniform helped set the mood of the song perfectly. An excellent performance.

We were then treated to a selection of four war poems. Three were from Julian Grenfell (1888 – 1915) who lived at the family home in Taplow Court. The first two were read very well by **MARTHA MACKAY-PARDOE**, **KIERA ASH** (*Into the Battle*) followed by, **ELLIE BULLEN**, **KERRY PRESTON & JOSPEH MOORE** (*To A Black Greyhound*). The movement was well thought out (rather than set to stand for still for the entire recitation). The changes of lighting also added interest to the readings. The pace was well presented by all the readers. There was contrast to the pieces, with good energy from **DANIEL KEATES** and **NIVEN WILLETT** for the poem *Hymn to the Wild Boar*.

The final poem, *For the Fallen*, a poem by Laurence Binyon that is immortalised on cenotaphs around the globe for the fourth stanza with those sombre words:

*“They shall grow not old, as we that are left grow old:  
Age shall not weary them, nor the years condemn.  
At the going down of the sun and in the morning  
We will remember them”*

This was read with wonderfully sombre delivery by **RACHEL MAY LE MESURIER**, **ELLIE BULLEN**, **JAMIE BULLEN**, **JOSEPH MOORE**, **KERRY PRESTON**, **KIERA ASH**, **MARTHA MACKAYPARDOE** and **OLIVER JAMES**.

*Keep The Home Fires Burning* composed in 1914 by Ivor Novello, was a very popular song of its era and was exceptionally well presented by **OLIVER JAMES** and **TILLY MITCHELL**.

For those who attended the last night on the Saturday, we were treated to additional fascinating reading by **SASKIA WITNEY** who read diary journals from her relative; again read with great pace and intonation.

Because of this extra item, the continuity of the evening was caught out, ever so slightly, with an unusual premature entrance by one of the cast. This I appreciate is very difficult to manage when the running order changes from one night to the other but well done for immediately noticing and I am sure that no-one else noticed your brief premature appearance.

The next few musical items were performed very well, the six females presented a well choreographed *King and Country* (complete with what looked like authentic tennis rackets from the period) and linked nicely to *I'll Make A Man Of You* but the soloists name was omitted from the programme and felt she deserved a mention as thought she gave a very strong rendition, with excellent control. Nice touch of comedy was introduced to trade a kiss for the King's shilling.

*Burlington Bertie from Bow*, a musical hall song from the early 1900s that was parodied in 1915 with such success that it performed more than the original. The song was very well performed by **TORRIE MARTIN**, a song about an aristocratic idle young man but performed in evening dress by a young woman. **TORRIE** gave a strong vocal performance, with some nicely choreographed movement.

The interesting story of *Walter Tull* was performed and read by **COURTNEY FLEMING** and assisted by **JAMIE BULLEN** and **JORDAN BULL**, telling the story the first Afro-Caribbean/mixed heritage outfield player to play in the top level of English football who was commissioned as a Second Lieutenant despite the 1914 Manual of Military Law specifically excluding "Negroes"/"Mulattos" from commanding as officers

Tribute readings of five local heroes who were awarded the Victoria cross were read very touchingly. I noticed that one of the mics was turned on for the wrong performer but this was immediately rectified as not to interfere the performance and was an isolated incident in what was an otherwise faultless sound and light performance with all effects on cue and at the appropriate levels.

The show was completed with some audience participation to some very well known songs of that era – *Daisy Bell, I Do Like To Be Beside The Seaside, Pack Up Your Troubles* and *Jerusalem*. Rather worryingly, I did not need to look at the words on the projected screen, as seem to know them all! Each of these songs were carefully choreographed to ensure that once again they were interesting to watch as well as listen.

### **Director of Act 1 (TANYA BEETON)**

Overall the direction was very good indeed, with good entrances and exits, good movement on stage and each item being well chosen for its variety and they moved promptly between each piece.

### **Music Director (PIPPA EDEN)**

Each musical item was very well rehearsed, with each performer confidently singing their part.

### **Choreography (NIKKI MAINE)**

The movement fitted perfectly for the era, and I liked the interesting “marching” for the opening number. This is very much a personal view, but I did not feel any movement (although it was impeccably delivered by the cast) was necessary for the closing number, *Jerusalem*. With everyone standing for this well known hymn, it felt a little out of place. The choreography for all the individual items was perfect – just the right of amount of movement to keep the pieces interesting but not so much that it came a distraction.

### **Stage Manager (MAGGIE KEARNEY)**

The stage was expertly managed for both acts by Maggie and her team.

### **Properties (MAGGIE KEARNEY)**

There were a lot more properties than I was expecting –for both acts but all of them appeared to be in period and appropriate to the plot or setting.

### **Costumes (ISABELLE FOLEY, JEAN GULRAJANI)**

I liked the idea of the simple use of costumes, the greys/blacks and whites; and then just add appropriate jackets, hats where required. The “tennis” outfits looked very good and added contrast to

the other scenes. A lot of attention had been put into ensuring that each item was interesting visually, so well done!

## **POPPY**

The second half we were treated to a new piece of drama, a one act play written by Julian Fox. The play was entered into the Maidenhead Drama Festival earlier in the year but I do not know if this was the original cast or a new one. However, to me it seemed perfectly cast, with each character understanding their role and giving a convincing performance.

The play starts in the modern day, in the attic where Oliver and Poppy find a series of letters from what we soon discover is from their grandfather's time during the war. The scene very cleverly changes from the white sheet coverings to reveal a split stage, one half being the trenches of the Western Front whilst the other being that of a converted church acting as a field hospital. The rest of the play covers the exchange of letters between Charlie, who is in the trenches, with his sister, Rose, who is on the field hospital. The letters act as the link between the scenes, but then the action is acted out as we see the characters talk about their lives, their hopes, dreams and fears.

The piece is very well written, giving opportunities for comedy as well as tragedy. The ten performers all acted superbly, each giving a good unique and distinguishable character.

## **Poppy/Rose (KIRSTIE BRADBROOK-ARMIT)**

I thought Kirstie gave a wonderfully controlled performance as both Poppy and then Rose. Her vocal delivery and characterisation was spot on. She portrayed the innocence of Rose's exceptionally well indeed.

## **Oliver/Charlie (ZAC ABBOTT)**

Zac gave a very strong performance of both characters, showing just enough differences for the parts to be distinguishable. His movement, voice and character were perfectly presented by this talented youngster.

**Danny (NIVEN WILLETT), Harry (DANIEL KEATES), Richard (MATTHEW HARCOURT) and TOM (JONATHAN COOPER).** I have put all these together as each of them performed superbly. What I particularly liked was the fact that each person had a distinct character. They could have so easily been portrayed as one dimensional characters but clearly thought had been given to their backgrounds and circumstances. The moments of humour, particularly by NIVEN, were very well crafted with an understanding of comic delivery. There were nice moments of vulnerability displayed by JONATHAN as the young 16 year old Tom. I liked the comic element in the food scene – but be careful MATTHEW not to rush your lines as felt some were a little too quick. I loved the reactions when discussing about Mary and her boy – superbly done. DANIEL's performance as the prickly HARRY was very well observed without going over the top. This was a nice tight cast that worked exceptionally well together.

## **Ada (GRACE WILLIS), Beatrice (LORNA YOUNG), Elizabeth (TILLY MITCHELL) and Margaret (AMELIA WALL)**

Like the boys, the girls all worked very well together with a good sense of team work. All of the characters were wonderfully and clearly defined. Some of the smaller roles particularly were effective. LORNA's Beatrice was a joy to watch – lovely facial expressions and a clear, loud voice. Her “prayer scene” was very well presented. AMELIA's Margaret, clearly the one in charge (although it was never mentioned) was deftly portrayed with skill; loving the contrast of her bossiness with her moments of tenderness when recalling her lost love. GRACE's Ada could so have easily been overplayed but she clearly understood how to subtly play her anger, which for me, meant her scene about her background was poignantly and carefully portrayed with great effect. Elizabeth is a lovely part to play and TILLY adeptly performed the role to perfection.

## **JULIAN FOX (Director)**

Congratulations on two accounts – one for the fabulous script that had depth and meaning. The scenes were particularly poignant for the centenary anniversary. The play was very well cast and movement justified. The acting areas were very tight for space, but movement was purposeful and relevant; the blocking sufficient so that I could see everyone at every point and clearly saw their facial reactions. The build up to the blast was very well observed (both in the writing and the staging). I loved the ending with the single blood soaked uniform resting in the spot light.

**SET** The show began with an open set, with white sheets covering the 1900's scenes. A gobo set front of centre, of a window, which helped set the attic scene. It immediately presented a scene of age, of secrets to be told (the chest very visible DSR). The reveal for the trench and church was simply and quickly achieved. The trenches looked very realistic, with the sand bags on the back wall and wooden benches for the soldiers to sit/lie on. The church was a painted brick wall with appropriate furniture. I liked the way the trenches “opened” to reveal the final “over the top” scene.

## **Costumes (ISABELLE FOLEY, JEAN GULRAJANI)**

All of the soldiers and nurses uniforms looked very authentic to the period. I liked the idea of Charlie and Poppy coming from the opening scene and simply changing into the action. Clearly a lot of effort had gone into the costumes that made the piece feel authentic.

## **Sound (BRIAN COX, CHRIS MOWER)**

I liked the contrast of the modern music (fading to be on the Ipod) at the beginning to that of the music fading to the gramophone player at the end. Both pieces helped set the period and was delivered at the right level. I liked the sound of the guns getting closer, more immediate on each scene and then finally, eerily silent before the scene when they go over the top. The blast was excellently timed and the off stage effects of the whistles was also very well executed.

## **Lighting (ANDY NICHOLSON)**

All the effects were on cue. The set was very well lit, creating a claustrophobic “dark” interior atmosphere but light enough for us to see all of the action and the actors faces. The bomb blasts were very effective. The cues from lighting either side were executed swiftly to ensure the action flowed without un-necessary hesitation.

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## **Programme**

The sixteen page black and white programme with a colour cover was an interesting read – crammed with facts and feature about the First World War. The running order in the middle of the programme was easy to read (even in half light of the auditorium). I enjoyed the feature on what the youngsters are doing now (and wish them all the very best of fortune). I did notice that the advert on the back page needs updating as it still had Ursula's maiden name.

## **Front of House**

Once again my wife and I were very well looked after by a busy front of house team.

I thoroughly enjoyed a wonderful varied evening of entertainment by a very talented group of young people and look forward to watching *Miss Saigon* in 2015.



**Gordon Bird**

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