

# Burton Operatic Society's production at Horninglow

One of the most difficult things about producing light opera must be how to retain an audience's interest in a plot that takes three hours to unfold but which need only take three sentences. But the Burton and District Operatic Society, in their presentation of Franz Lehar's "Land of Smiles," achieve this with plenty of room to spare.

The plot is simple enough: Lisa, the beautiful daughter of General Lichtenfel, falls in love with a visiting Chinese potentate and returns to his country with him to marry him. But to her chagrin she discovers that, according to ancient Chinese custom, Prince Sou-Chong also plans to take four other wives.

Lisa sees the error of her ways and transfers her love to the handsome Captain Gustl von Ploetz—who she had regarded up to then only as a friend—who has remained devoted to her throughout the whole episode.

Lehar's China is not, of course, the China of junks, dirty rivers and a largely impoverished people: it is the romantic China of buddhas, garden pavilions and dragons, all splendidly recreated by Charles Pole's colourful production and, especially, by costumes that have, I am sure, graced many a West End stage and will do again.

## CONFIDENT APPROACH

Elizabeth Booth makes a fine Lisa, a delightful voice only once or twice missing the note, something probably attributable to first night nerves. But she has a confident and straightforward approach to the role, just what Lehar wanted.

I felt, though, that she, like Adrian Bader in the opposite leading part of the Prince, could have made far more of the few really dramatic moments the plot provides, in particular when her attempt to escape is abruptly interrupted by Sou-Chong.

Mr. Bader, too, has a very fine tenor voice, and it is to his great credit that he made the old favourite "You Are My Heart's Delight" sound as fresh as it must have done at its first performance years ago. That is some achievement.

For a Chinaman, though, he seemed just a little too inscrutable—the honours in that direction being taken by Kenneth Durey's impassive Fu-Lie. I suggest that perhaps there could be more solemnity in the ceremony of donning the symbolic yellow jacket—the way Mr. Bader put it on, he looked as though he had just finished having a haircut.

For those in the audience who are heartless enough to think the main plot "soppy," there is a skeletal sub-plot centring on the energetic love-life of Lieutenant Rudi Von Westhof, played with great gusto by John Gould.

A shame, I thought, that he and Pamela Clarke's Mi did not fall in love at the end; they could have had a great thing going there. Mr. Gould also contributed to the success of several lively musical numbers, in particular "Give Me a Girl."

## SENSITIVE CHORUS

The whole show is, of course, a feast of good tunes and stands or falls on the music. The Burton and District Operatic Society is fortunate in having an intelligent and sensitive chorus who do much to give the production its flow: and the girls, especially in Act II, look smashing.

The song "Lonely Serenade" is a particular triumph for sensitive musicianship, and no doubt owes a great deal to the musical direction of Coral Gould, who also leads the orchestra unobtrusively through its accompanying role.

Only the overture seemed rather shaky, where the waltz lacked the lilt one could reasonably expect.

It seems churlish to describe David Neale's as a supporting part — after all, he gets the girl in the end! — but he is well cast as the hapless Gustl, if a little uncertain of himself.

Marion Yeomans and William Poole perform perhaps the best number of the evening, "Not Too Old", but I felt the latter, as the blustering Colonel Bloch, could be even funnier if he tried getting away from a clichéd interpretation. Jack Copeland is a suitably Jeeves-ish Butler and very good, while Ann Oakley, Christine George, Joy Appleby and Glenna Acres form a vivacious quartet as Lisa's friends.

If you like good old-fashioned entertainment, embellished by some uncomplicated music and exotic settings with costumes and scenery to match (including an impressive Buddha), then "Land of Smiles" is for you. It runs until Saturday at the Horninglow Secondary School, at 7.15 p.m. each night. N.D.W.