

1987 *La Belle Hélène*

Polesden Lacey

Saturday July 11 1987

ESOS

Producer: *Gillian Jarvis*

Musical director: *Angela Barker*

Choreographer: *Shirley Knight*.

One is tempted to use the extravagant language of the West End marquees. “Riot of colour and fun”. “Exuberance, energy, and enthusiasm cascade across the footlights”. “So beautifully choreographed I wouldn't have cared if it had all been mime”. And so on. And to do so would be absolutely right. ESOS's production was worthy of an even bigger setting. The punters should have been queuing all night to get tickets!

La Belle Hélène, at Dorking Halls, was the first RSOS show I saw. At that time I marvelled at how they had managed to find a handsome, strapping, mature-voiced 25-year old tenor to take the lead. And, this time, four years on, I marvel how that same tenor is even better and is still only 25! For my money, David Brown [*Paris*] can take the juvenile leads for years to come, and he'll always be worth every penny.

Michelle Luck, as Hélène, was nothing less than superb. Regal, imperious, and glamorous, combined with beautiful singing and perfect diction. I'll long remember one of her songs where Michelle had to finish on a fairly high note (something like a top E I would guess) and evidently the score was marked *pp*. The control of that note was absolute perfection. Daft as it may sound to say it, for me that note symbolised the show as a whole. I doubt that Michelle can ever have been better. For the future, I'd settle for as near to this as she can make it.

The clown prince (or king, in the context of this show) Phil Felstead [*Menelaus*], was, as we always expect, hilarious, despite the fact that I suspect that Polesden Lacey is not the very best venue at which to view his remarkable talents (from the distance of row N one couldn't really see faces, and to miss Phil's face is to miss a treat!)

The other kings were equally excellent. Stentorian-voiced Fred Harrison [*Achilles*] oozing power like a pocket battleship; David-2-3 Longes [*Ajax*], as ever, all perfect timing and sheer professionalism (Fred and David's *Gendarmes* duet bringing forth encore calls which unfortunately had to be ignored); Andrew Glass [*Agamemnon*] turning in another performance that was as big as he is.

Simon Cooksey [*Orestes*] has a happy knack of getting himself perfectly cast which probably says as much about him as for the auditioning panel. He can look back on this performance with great satisfaction. John Rapley, as the augur, played his double-headed coin role with great aplomb, and with an occasional agility that made me envious. What a joy it is to be able to hear every word that a performer says or sings. John's performance was worth the money on its own. And Roger Nelson [*Philoctetes*], in a role that in many hands would have been instantly forgettable, imposed his character on the play in such a way that for me, he was perhaps the greatest achievement in a show packed with achievements.

It was really that good! All of it. Dazzling costumes. Graceful dancing. Colourful sets and lighting. The chorus in consistently fine voice (though I couldn't always hear the words, but I suspect that was mostly the fault of the sound system). Not a hitch anywhere that I could see. And after the overture was played I forgot the orchestra existed and I suspect that this might be as big a compliment as one can pay to an orchestra in this sort of show.

DS