

Tale of two companies



ESOS 1908 production of *The Pirates of Penzance*

In the early years of the 20th century, a group of friends gathered together in the ball room of a large house called Batts Hill. They sang songs from contemporary musicals and decided, in 1907, to put on a production of Gilbert and Sullivan's *The Mikado* in the Market Hall in Redhill. ESOS produced a number of G&S operas until *The Yeomen of the Guard* in 1931 but was always ready to try other musicals including new imports from America. The first production of *Show Boat* opened on Broadway in 1927 and could be seen at the Drury Lane Theatre the following year. ESOS was ready to tackle the show just before war broke out in 1939 and then again in 1962.

Of all the 'modern American' shows, ESOS has found a special home in *Oklahoma!* with its first performance in 1958 with the special partnership of Andrew Glass as Curley and Molly Greaves as Laurey. ESOS went on to revisit *Oklahoma!* in 1973, 1987, 1992 and, most recently, in 2007 with a cast exclusively of young members. ESOS has always tried to involve younger members, as the children in *The King & I* (1971), *Carousel* (1959 and 1985), *Annie* (2006) and *The Sound of Music* (1989) but special arrangements have been made to run summer workshops for younger members to have an exclusive production of *Honk!* in 2004 and then *Oklahoma!* (2007). Next year's production include a youth production ofand an 'adult' production of *Crazy For You*.



The Opera Club 1961 production of *Princess Ida* featuring Andrew Glass, ESOS Phairman until last year, as King Hildebrand.

Meanwhile, during the 1950s, a number of members felt that they would rather perform works with a more operatic quality and a proposal was put to the committee to revive a production by Gilbert and Sullivan. This was refused and so a rival group called 'The Opera Club' was formed with their first production of *The Pirates of Penzance*. Productions were strictly according to the Red Book which gave a reassurance that the production was as Gilbert intended. When, finally, the copyright on G&S expired in 1980 new interpretations provided a fresh approach particularly when directed by Alison Cooper. *Ruddigore* was transformed by 1920s flappers in 1988 and *The Sorcerer* (1990) to a hospital for wounded soldiers during World War II. Since that time, The Opera Club have produced shows other than those of Gilbert and Sullivan, such as *The Beggars Opera* (1996), *The Merry Widow* (1992, 1998), *Brigadoon* (1999) and *Orpheus in the Underworld*. Recent productions have included *Chess* (2003), *Sweet Charity* (2005), *The Scarlet Pimpernel* (2006), *Children of Eden* (2007) and *The Music Man* (2008).

Meanwhile, ESOS produced a number of more operatic pieces including *The Count of Luxembourg* (1970), *La Belle Helene* (1984 and 1987) and *Orpheus in the Underworld* (1977 and 1992) and *Sweeney Todd* in 2002. Other recent productions have included *Anything Goes!* (2007) and *Kiss Me Kate* (2008).

So, let us put our hands together to say 'Thank you very much' for over 100 years of excellent performances from two superb societies.

Helier Dreux

Do take a look at the archive collections of the Opera Club and ESOS on their websites www.operaclub.org.uk and www.esos.org.uk . If you have any material that you feel could be added to these collections kindly let the author know at 01737 215 775. In particular, we would appreciate some help with locating some of the missing ESOS reviews and photos from early productions of The Opera Club. Thank you very much!