

Opera review: Die Fledermaus - English National Opera, London Coliseum

By Jessica Duchen – October 1st 2013

Die Fledermaus in jackboots? Is it no longer possible for a piece referring to Germany or Austria to be staged in this country without them? If it is, someone forgot to tell Christopher Alden. Johann Strauss's operetta is a work that bubbles over with champagne-sluced melody and humour. Alden shoehorns it into the 1930s and brings us the decline and fall of Vienna. I'd never imagined that *Die Fledermaus* could leave you feeling depressed.

This co-production with the Canadian Opera Company has already been seen, and slated, in Toronto. All the clichés pile in - psychoanalysis, the interpretation of dreams, black and white cinema, decadence, Dracula (well, he is a bat) and just when you think: "at least there are no Nazis..." ...oh dear. Yet there is little of the Viennese heart for which the music cries out; the lifeblood has been sucked out of it.

What fun remains comes from the translators - Daniel Dooner and Stephen Lawless, whose snarky text raised the evening's few smiles - and the costume designer, Constance Hoffman, who has produced deliciously detailed creations for the fancy-dress party.

Otherwise, how heavy-handed this lightest of confections has become. Messages about time running out virtually whack the audience on the head, along with the descent into what the jailer, Frosch – usually a comedy turn, but here a camp fascist prone to seizures – obsessively describes as "an entertaining little prison". And if tired cross-dressing jokes, men in silk undershorts and the presence of a bed on stage are meant to be sexy and sophisticated, that's a matter of opinion.

A really fine performance could have redeemed it. But the pace of the dialogue sagged, and while the conducting of Eun Sun Kim, making her ENO debut, was bright and efficient, Viennese style needs real "Schwung": malleable, dug-in waltz rhythms, flexible rubato and room to breathe, among other things. Some good singing from Jennifer Holloway as Prince Orlofsky – the character a crazed Russian oligarch, more 2013 than 1933 – and Edgaras Montvidas as Alfred, the tenor Rosalinde can't resist. Tom Randle was a charismatic Eisenstein, when he had a chance. Everyone tried their best, notably Rhian Lois's Adele, Andrew Shore's Frank and Richard Burkhard's Dr Falke. Julia Sporsén - who dazzled in *Julietta* by Martinu last year – had to climb a revolving staircase while singing her Czardas. The chorus sounded uncharacteristically tentative. A batty evening, in the wrong way.