

BROS Theatre Company

Chess • October 2004 • Hampton Hill Playhouse

REVIEW

What is the most serious game in the world : an ancient board game, or is it ... politics, diplomacy, romance, with all their rivalries and intrigues ? BROS examined this question in last week's production of Tim Rice's musical 'Chess'.

Played out against a pulsating score by ABBA's Benny Andersson and Bjorn Ulvaeus, 'Chess' is an allegory on Cold War politics and passionate relationships. The story is based loosely on battles in the 1970's on and off the board of Bobby Fischer and Soviet Grandmasters such as Spassky, Kasparov, and Korchnoi. Two Grandmasters, an American, Freddy Trumper, and a Russian, Anatoly Sergievsky, are used as major pieces in their countries' power politics and propaganda games. Florence Vassy, a Hungarian refugee, who at the outset is Freddy's second, falls in love with Anatoly, who then defects to the West. The board is controlled by the manipulations of KGB and CIA officers within the rank and file of the national delegation, who even sacrifice Svetlana, Anatoly's wife, in a gambit to win him back to the Soviet side.

The skill of Bryan Cardus gave us a Freddy in many moods ('Florence Quits' contrasted with 'Pity the Child') but his powerful singing voice seemed at times to be dangerously close to overreaching. Paul Kirkbright's strong acting and his widely ranged voice created an accurate portrait of the used and bemused Anatoly. Emma McLean-Cook attacked the part of Florence with great verve, her songs ranging from the punchy to the lyrical, such as 'I Know Him so Well', a beautiful duet with Svetlana, played by Alison Birtle (unfortunately as her swansong with BROS).

Robert Salter played the sinister KGB officer, Molokov, with energy and great stage presence against Jim Simpson's wiry and insinuating Walter, the CIA officer, the knights on our chessboard. Tom Butler created an impressionist portrayal of the Arbiter, a mechanistic character with overarching control of the game.

All these intrigues took place on Wesley Henderson Roe's interpretive set, a giant chessboard, its black and white highlighted in red, which flowed, Daliesque, from the backdrop, across the stage and down the apron. One detached square, which gave a point of asymmetry to the whole, was used as the position for most of the major solos, but this soon became too predictable. The squares were individually top-lit, part of Edward Pagett and Simon Roose's extensive atmospheric lighting design, which enhanced the ambience with elements such as side battens and followspots.

The choreography by Caroline Smith very cleverly interpreted the mood. In the two 'Chess Games', the moves of the pieces were elegantly replicated in the dancers movements; the diplomats marched with confrontational inevitability in bridge-breaking rhythm; whilst 'One Night in Bangkok' was a sassy peep at the red-light district.

The costumes, by Lynne Shirley and Marion McLaren, contrasted black and white with vivid

colour; and Joanna Lambert's costume for the Arbiter underlined his robotic nature.

Musical Director, Martin Wilcox, and his talented orchestra, modestly hidden in the wings, added a sparkling dynamism to the performance.

Steve Taylor, the Director, brought together the BROS team in their Chess tournament, a grand-masterly production, which never flagged in its energy, putting over the sinister nature of the work, but colouring it with insight and humour (the civil servants in 'Embassy Lament' were a wickedly penned caricature).

The most serious game ? In the words of Molokov, "the game is greater than its players".

Mark Aspen
Richmond & Twickenham Times
