

Wallace, Balfe and Mr Bunn by Bernard Farrell

Director: Ben Barnes

Musical Director: Kevin O'Carroll

Lighting Designer: Nick McCall

Designer: Blaithin Sheerin

Theatre Royal, Waterford

Reviewed: November 6th

Brendan Farrell's new musical play is set in the Theatre Royal in the present day and is presented as the posthumous production of Mr Alfred Bunn the original producer of composers William Vincent Wallace, Michael Balfe and Sir Julius Benedict, contemporaries working in musical theatre in London the 1800s. The play features a cast of four actors supported by a musical chorus, soloists and an orchestra and is a light-hearted look at the respective careers of the eponymous characters, interspersed with musical interludes featuring some of their popular compositions such as Balfe's *The Bohemian Girl*, Wallace's *Maritana* and Benedict's *The Lily of Killarney*.

Designer Blaithin Sheerin chooses minimal stage furniture and situates it so as to establish and capture the opposing personalities of Wallace and Balfe. Balfe sits on an upper class Victorian drawing room chair under the sepia gaze of family photographs while Wallace sits at a clerk's desk surrounded by miscellanea representing his penchant for the exotic. Bunn stands for the most part of the play centre-stage under a large illuminated clock which tells the real time and which serves as a visual reminder that he is running the show. Teal velvet curtains tied back on either side of the stage simply and stylishly suggest the lush theatricality of the Victorian era and this simplicity in the visual picture allows the soloists and chorus, whose costumes evoke the lavish theatrical fashion of the day, to have a contrasting and striking visual effect.

Behind the teal curtains is a cyclorama which Nick McCall lights with warm amber, orange and rosy hues complementing the rich colours in the costumes and curtains and adding to the nostalgic sense of a distant, more luxurious and elegant time.

Ben Barnes' direction adopts the Victorian musical theatre tradition of performers directly addressing their audience. This works well for the choral interludes and musical soloists whose performances are confident and polished. The drawback of this directorial approach is that there is a tendency for the production to become static and the rather formal and fixed positioning of the three central characters does little to alleviate this.

There is a fundamental issue with the script which presents a particular challenge to Malcolm Adams, playing the part of Bunn. In the dialogue given to Bunn Adams must and does acknowledge and relate to the audience. However within the text given to the characters of Balfe, Wallace and Benedict, which has them frequently contradicting each other and indulging in continuous petty bickering, it seems that these three characters, unlike Bunn, are not part of a public performance at all but are rather part of an initial read through. The result of this subtle contradiction in the script is that Adams often seems uncertain as to how to negotiate the relationship that he must maintain with the audience and his fellow characters. Unfortunately, as Adams also has obvious difficulties in remembering his lines and his attempt at an East End London accent is poor, his performance is often uncomfortable to watch.

Overall the play and the production seem written, directed and designed to encourage a gentle, genteel, uncritical and rather affectionate retrospective of the personalities and work under regard. The production is enjoyable but it is the Theatre Royal which emerges as the real star of the evening. Restored under Barnes' stewardship to a beautiful and intimate theatre of the Victorian era it is a treat to visit and a great asset to the city.

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