

Directors view: Black Eyed Susan

When we first read *Black Eyed Susan* in public, back in the pre-restoration days, we thought we were on to something. The play had a number of qualities which belied the poor reputation accorded by so many of 'Those in the Know' to early 19th-century English drama.

'Those in the Know' vilify the repertoire for being populist. This play certainly is populist – but then where's the harm in that? It is entertaining, full of music, dance, spectacle, humour and pathos. But it is also, we believe, much more than that. Is it not a play which deals with the plight of a woman, forcibly abandoned by her seafaring husband, who has nothing but her honour and his memory to protect her from ruin?

Does it not, fairly acerbically, comment on the reception offered to a generation of fighting men, returning to a world profiting from their absence and forever changed while they have been fighting, and dying, for their country?

Does it not, gently but insistently, point the finger at a rather self-satisfied, excessively indulgent society and point out with infinite respect, of course, that there might, just might, be a better way?

After all, Douglas Jerrold went on to write for the magazine *Punch*, so his agenda was certainly one which was critical of the status quo. Do 'Those in the Know' not see this or have I read Jerrold wrong?

Clearly he hit a popular nerve. *Black Eyed Susan* was the most performed play of the 19th-century that had been written in that century. I like to think that this is because its audiences recognised Jerrold as a man who stood apart from the establishment and who managed, through the medium of joyful, energetic and vibrant theatre, to pop the inflated bubble of pomposity in which that establishment resided.

It should come as no surprise to us that the man who helped to develop a great satirical magazine which caricatured and deflated some of the greatest egos of the time had cut his teeth in a satirical theatre genre which excelled at doing the very same thing.

The crucial difference, however, is that, in his theatre, Jerrold created flesh and blood, three-dimensional people who do real things, feel real pain and experience real joy.

And that is of great appeal to any maker of theatre, isn't it? Here I have been given a play which contains all those elements of theatre which are the main reasons for my doing it. I get the opportunity to explore text, song, dance, instrumental music, scenic device and spectacular effects at the same time as discovering the meat on the bone. And despite its definition as a Nautical Melodrama, I do believe there is plenty of meat to be had. Being a melodrama, however, doesn't mean it needs to be ham!

Colin Blumenau