

1984 La Belle Helene

Ingredients for success

Colourful, light-hearted entertainment, an enthusiastic cast, and a thoroughly receptive audience were the main ingredients of East Surrey Operatic Society's success at the Dorking Halls with Offenbach's *La Belle Hélène*. This was Gillian Jarvis' first production for the Society with whom she has, in recent years, played so many parts. Gill has always been one to come up with imaginative ideas and *Hélène* was filled with imaginative inspiration and novelty.

Touches of modern costume mingled with the more lavish attire of Ancient Greece in this time-testing send-up of the famous legend of Helen of Troy, not to mention light-hearted buffoonery – but if anyone thought it might downgrade Offenbach's popular classic they were very wrong. Indeed, this was far closer to the spirit of performances in Offenbach's own time than we have seen for many years. The Paris Theatre of 125 years ago was very open-minded, and *Hélène* was originally portrayed to send up the reigning Empress Eugenie of France, just as Jupiter in Offenbach's previous success *Orpheus in the Underworld* was based on her husband Napoleon III.

Most impressive in this production was the infectious enthusiasm of the many young members of the cast. The producer is to be congratulated for encouraging teenagers to take part.

The society worked wonders in the way that they coped with a very poor translation and arrangement by Phil Parks. It is a shame that better versions of these operettas are not available to amateur groups in any practical form. The script needed good acting to cover its inadequacies, and the musical score retained very little of Offenbach's original *Hélène* music, much of which had been cut and replaced by popular tunes from his other shows. Not that many of the audience realised it - they just sat back and thoroughly enjoyed the performance. The Society did well, however, to bring back some of the best 'missing' tunes on their own initiative, in the best traditions of good production.

Tony Powell