

**Benjamin Britten's *Albert Herring* at Oberlin:  
taking a comic opera seriously (Nov. 2)**

by Daniel Hathaway



In a video interview for Minneapolis Opera, Dame Jane Glover recalled the sage advice her director gave to the cast of Benjamin Britten's *Albert Herring* when she conducted his only comic opera at Glyndebourne.

*Never try to be funny. You have to be real. These people are saying these things because they mean it. It is quite easy to get carried away into something that is caricature and therefore shallow as opposed to real and profound.*



Oberlin Opera Theater director Stephanie Havey and her excellent student ensemble obviously concurred on Thursday evening, November 2, staging a production in Hall Auditorium that was delightful and authentic in every respect. The denizens of the fictional village of Loxford all seemed to be playing themselves rather than just animating cardboard figures ordered up from central casting.



The overbearing moralist Lady Billows (Elizabeth Hanje), the unctuous mayor (Gerard McCrohan), the sanctimonious Vicar (Alan Rendzak), the officious police superintendent (Evan Tiapula), the emasculating greengrocer's widow Mrs. Herring (Cassandra Davies), her



over-protected son and shop assistant Albert (Blake Harlson), the randy butcher's assistant Sid (Graham Lin) and his main squeeze Nancy (Inayah Raheem), and the trio of annoying village children Emmie, Cis, and Harry (Sabrina Schubert, Amelia Friess,

and Molly Chun) might all be stock British village characters, but their inhabitants succeeded in creating comedy by not trying too hard.

Borrowed from a short story by Guy de Maupassant, the plot revolves around Albert, a mummy's boy who turns out to be the only virtuous candidate for Lady Billows' revival of the May Festival Queen. Crowned King instead, he becomes the object of a practical joke when Sid spikes his lemonade during the Festival luncheon. Drunk and quite willing to be corrupted, Albert sets off on a bender that includes pub hopping, a fistfight, and the trashing of the greengrocery, all financed with his prize money.



When he turns up missing the next morning, the whole village launches a frantic search but ends up singing a threnody when his floral crown is discovered in the road, crushed by a cart. The unrepentant Albert stumbles into this solemn scene, rather proud of himself, only to receive a tongue-lashing from his mother instead of a prodigal son's welcome.



At this point, de Maupassant and Britten's librettist, Eric Crozier, part ways. The former's main character, Rosier, lives out a life of degradation, while the latter's

Albert returns to his greengrocer job, dealing out free peaches to the villa urchins and quietly reveling in his act of independence. He knows he can escape again if he wants to.



Acting and singing were uniformly splendid. Britten gives each character at least a brief solo aria, and their diction and projection carried clearly to the rear of the house. The wordy libretto begs for supertitles, and these flashed across the screen, perfectly timed to words in the score.

In the pit, Michael Sakir drew immaculate playing from his small but mighty 12-member instrumental ensemble while himself doubling on the keyboard —

somehow the crew managed to wrestle a grand piano into the pit. Hornist Sophie Griffith-Oh contributed flawless fanfares at the beginning of the second act, and the ensemble vividly created the soundscape of a seaside resort during Mrs. Herring's recollection of enlarging and framing Albert's picture, while tucking in clever references to Wagner.



Laura Carlson-Tarantowski's colorful scenic design drew applause when the curtain rose on the banqueting scene, and Chris Flaharty's period costumes and Jeremy K. Benjamin's lighting contributed to the several moods of the action. One curious aspect of the show — rather ghoulish makeup (whiteface and outlined eyes for the Vicar) — went unexplained.

The great thing about art and music is their ability to leave unresolved ambiguities hanging in the air. Is *Albert Herring*

autobiographical for its composer as some believe, or is it simply an amusing

representation of life in an English village around 1900? And, by the way, is this show truly a comedy?

There were only a few moments when the audience laughed out loud on opening night — sight gags like Albert’s rum-induced, whole-body hiccups and Harry’s unmistakable need to answer the call of nature among them. But a thunderous ovation during the curtain calls suggested that a good time was being had all evening on both sides of the footlights. Hopefully the Friday-Sunday cast enjoyed inhabiting their characters as much as this one did.

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