

# Stage Two's Venetian treat

Stage Two Downham's latest production is an up-to-date version of *The Servant of Two Masters*, a play of the Commedia dell'arte genre written in 1746 by Carlo Goldini, writes Gerry Purchase.

Commedia dell'arte was an early style of Italian travelling theatre which relied heavily on improvisation, audience inclusion and *soto voce* asides.

This play manifested itself as a 14th century, breakneck, fun version of a Brian Rix farce, where the plot is barely credible and characters exit through one door only to re-enter through another in the blink of an eye.

The play is set in a Venetian piazza which has been cleverly recreated with convincing perspective on Downham Village Hall's small stage by Brian Harworth, Mick Gidlow and Dave King. It is this vista that the audience is offered to muse upon with a sense of anticipation as they take their seats.

There is a punchy opening.



The whole cast burst into the auditorium rendering an Italianesque song and, as most exit, singing, through various openings, those remaining on stage immediately begin to tell the incredible tale.

Silvio, played by Tim Martin, an obvious choice for a handsome swain, is being betrothed to Clarice, played by Jenny Spurrett who is every bit the fair maiden. They are in the presence of their respec-

tive fathers: the irascible Pantelone, Clarice's dad, played with comedic aplomb by Barney Cullen and Doctor Lombardi, convincingly played as a learned, superior type by Richard Hubbard, who is Silvio's.

The betrothal, however, is beset with problems. Clarice had intended to marry Federigo Rasponi of Turin but he had been killed in a duel, defending his sister's honour by trying to prevent a marriage to the victor,

Florindo Artusi.

Having fled Turin to avoid the law, Florindo is pursued to Venice by Beatrice who is Federigo's sister, lover of Florindo and subject of the duel. Her aim is to claim a dowry from Pantelone in order to help defend Florindo. To achieve her end she comes dressed as a man and posing as her brother and, in spite of being gorgeously feminine, Erica Mileham, who plays Beatrice, still manages,

with fine acting skills and a little suspension of disbelief, to convince the audience of her masculinity.

The complicated plot continues when Beatrice takes Truffaldino, the character around whom the play revolves, as her servant. He is played throughout with the competence, wit, animation and good miming skills required by the main character, by Chris Bowers.

By great cheek and opportunism, Truffaldino also manages to get himself hired as a servant by Florindo the fugitive, played well as the bewildered lover by Robert Crane, who arrives seeking lodgings at The Inn owned by Brighella, played by a bucolic Steve Cooke.

At their first encounter, Truffaldino, as a light hearted romantic thread, falls for Smeraldina, Clarice's maid. Annie Wildman takes this gem of a part and plays it hilariously in a real gorblimey-Old Kent Road manner which makes her a proper scene stealer.

Having set the various relationships the play romps along through a whirlwind of dramas, deceptions and misunderstandings. Many of these take place at The Inn where the Bob Cleeve plays a Corleone version of Manuel from Faulty Towers and Peter Hampson a doddering two soups-Acorn Antiques waiter. Both parts were well played and elicited many chuckles from the audience.

Finally, of course, expectations are achieved, honours are satisfied and lovers are united. All's well that ends well.

Such a fast moving, complicated play needed an experienced director and, indeed, the masterful hand of Fran Osborne succeeded in creating an outstanding, polished production.

As an evening's entertainment it was second to none. The costumes and set, together with the inter-act and incidental music, cleverly written by Richard Hubbard and Annie Wildman, all joined to create a truly memorable Venetian evening.