

THE HIRED MAN - press reviews

The Hired Man: gripping portrayal of passion and strife. Mix of music and theatre finds perfect harmony

The Hired Man was given its Dutch-language première at the Theatre 't Eilandje in the presence of composer Howard Goodall. It was a gripping performance of a little-known but musically skilful and dramatically rich musical, cleverly presented by the musical department of the Ballet of Flanders. Director Jan Verbist and choreographer Martin Michel opted for strongly stylized action. The alternation of music and theatre puts across the passion and poignancy. Max Smeets leads a small but vigorous orchestra in a musical language, which, as musicals go, is highly original. The Ballet of Flanders proves once again that in the world of musicals there can be quality and not just kitsch.

Eddie Vaes in de 'Nieuwe Gazet', 27/01/2001

The hired man sings sublimely. Moving performances by Jan Schepens and Janke Dekker

Just as the murderess of Jan Schepens was being exposed in the VRT soap *Thuis* (Home), that self-same Jan was standing large as life on the stage of Theatre 't Eilandje at the première of *The Hired Man*, the new production of the musical department of the Royal Ballet of Flanders. Composer Howard Goodall was in the audience. And he saw that it was good.

The Brit expressed his satisfaction afterwards. "One of the best versions I've seen so far", he muttered. It could well be, of course, that he says the same thing wherever in the world his work is being performed. But we must admit that it was a very good performance. We enjoyed a beautiful spectacle, which never for a moment threatened to become banal and which was occasionally even moving.

The drama that emanates from this epic is impressive. Director Jan Verbist succeeded in evoking the atmosphere of those days and with fairly simple means. A sparse décor are enough to create totally different situations in the space of a few seconds. The divine music did the rest. And of course there were the marvellous voices of Jan Schepens, probably one of Belgium's greatest musical talents, and Janke Dekker, who had little difficulty convincing everyone of her talent. We already knew what baritone Ernst Daniel Smid was capable of.

Herman Van Doninck in 'De Gazet van Antwerpen', 27-28/01/2001

Dutch première of The Hired Man. Impassioned beauty

Jessica De Mulder, de 'Bossche Omroep', 28/01/2001

Simplicity becomes The Hired Man

Sometimes less is more. As the musical department of the Royal Ballet of Flanders shows with *The Hired Man*... The story provides scope for catchy ensemble numbers with compelling rhythms and a powerful choreography. Yet the more intimate work, in which Jan Schepens in particular excels, does not suffer as a result. He makes John a man of flesh and blood, vulnerable in his changeability. Ernst Daniël Smid is also first rate in a rather smaller role than we would expect of him. There are good supporting roles as well, for example that of Philip Bolluyt as comic pleasure-seeker, while the ensemble also does a fine job.

Without much to-do and spectacle, The Hired Man tugs at the heart-strings.

Marco Weijers in 'De Telegraaf', 5/02/2001

Sober musical with a real story

The Hired Man is the name of the new musical production by the Royal Ballet of Flanders premièred in Den Bosch yesterday. The public appeared unanimous afterwards: hard to understand that this wonderful show will only run for three months.

The Hired Man is a little-known British show by composer Howard Goodall and writer Melvyn Bragg. The story goes that in the early eighties Goodall was tired of the musical, which had become increasingly bombastic, grotesque and clichéd. So he decided to make one of his own. The show was a success in London, arrived in New York at the end of the eighties, but then - silence. Fortunately, the wilful musical department of the Royal Ballet of Flanders pulled the piece out from the back of the cupboard and dusted it off. The result is a subdued production, averse to overblown stage props and showy scenery, the music and songs are totally captivating and, believe it or not: it is about something.

A dramatic story forms the leitmotif of this realistic and moving period piece. It is brought with tremendous energy and passion on a stage consisting of moving panels, with next to no props. The café is a back wall, the house is a kitchen table and that's it. And nothing more is needed. The stage is so versatile that - with the help of slick lighting - even a collapsed mine or a pitched battle is plausible. With *The Hired Man*, the Royal Ballet of Flanders, which last year took Sondheim (including the less successful *Company*) into its repertoire, shows that musicals can be more than an all-in company outing. The artistic choice of this production deserves respect and full auditoria. Lovers of better work, go and see it and quickly, because after April 28th the show will undoubtedly go back into the cupboard to stay.

René van der Velden in 'Brabants Dagblad/De Stem', 5/02/2001

The Hired Man, averse to big sets, bombast and sentiment

After a couple of minutes twenty angry-looking country folk with clenched fists appear.

They are being exploited and they won't put up with it. They long for the day that their lives are no longer ruled by the landowner and God. That stereotype catch-phrase, familiar from almost all the great musicals, hardly seems consistent with the observation of composer-lyricist Howard Goodall that he can't stand musicals. But apart from this obligatory scene, *The Hired Man* differs quite substantially from the well-known mainstream musicals. No big stage sets, no bombast in the music despite a clear preference for English-style chorus work, and the sentiment is not overdone. The texts are fairly rudimentary, but then it is unrealistic to expect poetry in this field.

The Hired Man is about a woman (Janke Dekker) in a village in the north of England, who finds it difficult to choose between the adventure of an extramarital love affair (Ernst Daniel Smid) and the security of her family and society. Set around the year 1900, this love story unfurls against the background of an agrarian way of life versus the complex industrialized society. The first half spends too long bogged down in the love story with tunes that are rather too artless. But when Jan Schepens as the deceived husband gives as good as he gets in the sparkling number "Wat ben ik dwaas geweest" (How foolish I have been), the whole production gathers momentum nicely. The suffering of the First World War, both on the battlefield and among those who stayed at home, is portrayed very simply and effectively. A little smoke, an ingenious stage set that can be moved apart and magnificent lighting are enough. The three lead roles are interpreted extremely well. Janke Dekker in particular makes the evening a success. No fault can be found with her singing, as we know, but as an actress, too, she provides a top-notch performance. She reconciles herself with the lot of a woman who is beaten, without becoming pitiful.

The Hired Man took some hard knocks in its première year 1984. That was the year the Broadway success *42nd Street* arrived in London and scored better than Goodall and Bragg's musical, especially in terms of publicity. Now not only does the same scenario threaten to repeat itself - Joop van den Ende has included *42nd Street* in the repertoire - but the Royal Ballet of Flanders is still suffering the negative aftermath of the Sondheim musical *Company*. Last season that production attracted only an average two-third capacity and that made the theatre directors wary about signing up on a large scale for *The Hired Man*.

Yet Linda Lepomme, Artistic Director of the Royal Ballet of Flanders, sees no reason whatsoever to be driven off her wilful course. She believes it is the duty of a subsidized company not to rely on repertoire, which has proved so commercial. The concert version of Sondheim's *Follies* is just behind them, and his *A little night music* has again been programmed for next season. *The Hired Man* fits nicely into that row of experiments, which the Dutch-speaking musical public can be happy with.

Patrick van den Hanenberg in 'De Volkskrant', 2/02/2001

Musical about real people

Mirjam Keunen in the 'Algemeen Dagblad', 3/02/2001

Life as a never-ending struggle

The Hired Man is social realism that takes the exploitation of the working classes, the rise of the workers' movement and the insanity of war as the framework for a three-cornered relationship. Consciousness-raising theatre almost, but presented in a very tasteful and professional manner.

The musical department of the Royal Ballet of Flanders is well able to stage a worthy Dutch-language version of *The Hired Man*. In the production by the darling of Flanders Jan Verbist (*Samson & Gert*, *Kaboutert Plop* and recently *Pinokkio*), dramatic austerity and the grand gesture go hand in hand and make good partners. This coupled with an ingenious minimal set by Hartwig Dobbertin and an excellent choreography by the Australian Martin Michel (also involved in the Dutch *Miss Saigon*), results in an impressive production.

Coos Versteeg in 'De Haagse Courant', 05/02/2001

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After the family musicals *Assepoester* (Cinderella) and *Pinokkio* (Pinocchio), director Jan Verbist had the very difficult task of staging this production. Difficult partly because the Royal Ballet of Flanders cannot fall back on big sets and often has to rely on suggestions. The décor consists of a number of tilting parts in a sloping plane. These represent a hillside, trenches, the mines and the like. A nice idea...

The Hired Man is the best of what the Ballet has staged in recent years. For those who still have their doubts: Howard Goodall may not like musicals, but he knows better than anyone how to write the music for them.

Review on the 'Musical Fan' website, 29/01/2001

A cheerful musical it is not, but what's wrong with that for a change! Howard Goodall's music was pleasing to the ear. As well as a few fine songs, there are impressive ensembles and when the lyric takes precedence the music restricts itself to a piano or a discrete orchestral accompaniment. The performance we attended was enjoyable, not least because of the superb diction of all the soloists and their convincing portrayal of the characters...The small orchestral ensemble responded well under the animated leadership of Max Smeets. Jan Verbist's production was smooth and succeeded in creating just the right atmosphere: one moment it was poignant, the next cheerful. As always with the musical productions of the Ballet of Flanders, the austerity of the set was almost Spartan. The audience expressed its approval of the show and there was also loud applause for Howard Goodall, who had come over from England specially for the performance.

Review on 'De Operagazet' website, 29/01/2001

*Under the approving eye of the composer himself, the musical department of the Royal Ballet of Flanders came up with a première yesterday that was indeed 'a first'. For the first time the English *The Hired Man* was staged in a language other than English. Expectations were running high. The cast spoke for itself: Jan Schepens, Janke Dekker,*

Ernst Daniel Smid, Maïke Boerland, Filip Bolluyt, Kirsten Cools, Stefan Hamblok, et al: each and every one of them artists who had already proved something on the musical stage. Add to that the experienced team of Jan Verbist as director, Max Smeets as musical director and Martin Michel as choreographer. Something big had to come of it and hopefully something positive too...

.. *The Hired Man* is a moving love story cum powerful social drama. The struggle for justice and against injustice is often intensely exposed. This alternates with a story of ardent love, which eventually results in a veritable three-cornered relationship. Now and then a deathly silence falls, underlining the emotionally charged moments so much that the spectator is carried away by the music and the story, which towards the end reaches a climax of pure drama. A happy ending it is not, but given the gripping events that have gone before, that would hardly have been realistic. The acting of the majority of the cast was pretty good. The audience cries genuine tears at regular intervals. Filip Bolluyt certainly deserves a special mention for his strong portrayal of Isaac...

...I am confident the general public will enjoy this production. Powerfully emotional moments alternate with explosive, pugnacious scenes. Those expecting a typically English show will be disappointed. The Ballet of Flanders proved courageous enough not to take over the successful English production indiscriminately. Everything was changed and the result is intensely beautiful and compelling. As the composer Howard Goodall said with sincerity afterwards: "At last the piece has been played as I had in my mind's eye when I composed it". He could not have paid a nicer compliment.

Review on 'De Showbizsite' (website), 29/01/2001