

Cha Cha Char

Alan Frost enjoys being out and about.

The best and cheapest entertainment in London can be obtained at the Royal Opera House where for the inconsiderable sum of £7 you may attend one of the tea dances held in the Floral Hall. The admission price includes a cup of tea and biscuits and for two hours, from 1pm (not usually my teatime), you may either dance or observe a last bastion of the English eccentric. The dress code is pure nostalgia, including blue suede shoes worn by those in their ninth decade as they remember how life once was. Note the proud grey ponytails of men in their seventies. Enjoy the ballet of those who jived when the dance was first imported. Witness the efforts of serious dancers as they fight the onset of arthritis. What tales these characters could tell!

There is a decidedly rakish and cosmopolitan feel to the place – I was chatted up by a delightful Chinese lady, and Mrs Frost had two offers while I was at the bar sorting out some tea. It's great fun and I am full of admiration for the sprightly gentlemen prowling the room looking for a few minutes of samba solace, or those who merely walk round the floor with legs of clay. Their ladies may have trouble recalling where they left their keys but the footwork is as fresh as their memories of food rationing. Leave your

inhibitions at the cloakroom and prepare to be amazed. This was by way of preparation for seeing Darcey Bussell's emotional farewell that same evening. She and Carlos Acosta were sensational.

Patrick Stewart's *Macbeth* has created differences of opinion. Four of us saw it at Chichester and two of us loved it and two didn't. I had not enjoyed his season last year at Stratford but from the front row of the Minerva I was enthralled by this clever production. Kate Fleetwood's transformation from a driven, ruthless woman to a mere observer of her husband's depravity and ambition was a joy to see. I was totally convinced by Stewart in this fascinating production directed by Rupert Goold.

The set was suitably spooky. For instance, the opening scene was set in a battlefield operating theatre, and the three solicitous nurses suddenly became those familiar witches. An old-fashioned lift with sliding metal-grill doors was put to effective use and also served for Banquo's entrance in the banquet scene, which occurred just before the interval. We saw the scene from Macbeth's eyes as the ghost sashayed along the table and disappeared into the audience. The scene was repeated after the interval from the diners' perspective with Banquo's ghost not on stage. Very clever.

Don Pasquale

It's hardly been the summer for opera alfresco and there will have been some decidedly soggy

picnics. Diva Opera have cornered a useful niche in this market and I saw a production of *Don Pasquale* at Lulworth Castle on the Isle of Purbeck. You either love this type of thing or hate it, and those present, some 130 or so in black tie, seemed to enjoy the return on their £50 entrance money – most of which was going to the Red Cross. The piano accompaniment by music director Bryan Evans was sparkling and kept the whole affair very lively. Richard Suart as the eponymous 'elderly bachelor' was hyperactive throughout. Nicholas Sales was mercilessly upstaged during his Act II aria 'Povero Ernesto' (poor Ernesto, indeed) and I felt quite sorry for the young man as Mr Suart hammed silently to the willing audience. Nevertheless, all were happy and it was in a good cause.

Whenever I attend the BBC Proms I have to adjust my lazy, ageing ears to the demanding acoustic of the Royal Albert Hall. In a spell-binding performance by the Bournemouth Symphony Orchestra under Marin Alsop I found myself reconfiguring my brain's hard drive during Beethoven's *Leonore No 3*. By the time the Barber Violin Concerto was played by James Ehnes I was attuned and able to hear this wonderful piece properly. The second movement is of exquisite beauty. The American theme continued after the interval with Copland's *Third Symphony*, including at the beginning of the last movement his 'Fanfare for the Common Man'. This was American music at its best and a triumph for this exceptional conductor – a very uncommon woman.