



REVIEWS

OTC/Barber of Seville Solstice Arts Centre, Navan

MICHAEL DERVAN

Opera Theatre Company's new *Barber of Seville* had its first night in one of Ireland's newest arts venues, the Solstice Arts Centre in Navan, which opened its doors in May 2006.

The auditorium in the Solstice is anything but the archetypal black box favoured by the designers of so many of Ireland's arts centres.

The space is asymmetrical, the seating is layered and angled in interesting ways, and the acoustic, if this performance is anything to judge by, is excellent for opera.

The OTC production seats the small instrumental ensemble on the right of the stage, on which designer David Craig has placed a giant guitar case which opens, clam-like, to reveal the interior of Bartolo's house. The guitar theme is followed through in the serenading, with Figaro actually playing guitar, and in Rosina's music lesson. And there's an amusing touch in having the case close slowly over the singers at the end of Act I.

The costumes are fully in period, and director Bill Bankes-Jones treats the piece as a lively, sometimes hyperactive romp. The excesses of Martin Higgins's Bartolo take things rather too far (though his larking about

did spark some belly laughs), and the camped-up Count Almaviva of Niall Morris also strays into unproductive territory. Morris's singing tilts dangerously close to operatic parody, which rather undermines his stature as an ardent lover, and both singers are vocally and musically at their best when at their most restrained.

Owen Gilhooly's suitably manipulative Figaro finds a far more satisfying balance between energy and musical style, and Doreen Curran's reserved and poised Rosina, if anything, is even more stylish as the object of the Count's affections. Gerard O'Connor is typically blustery as her avaricious and infatuated guardian Basilio, and Mary O'Sullivan bustles effectively as his maid Bertha.

Conductor Roy Laughlin paces the music effectively, even if some of the patter is too fast to work in English. Aided by the Solstice acoustic, he secures some of the most effective chamber ensemble as orchestra sounds I've heard at an OTC production.

On tour until March 8th