

Gustav Holst's *The Idea* at Gatehouse Theatre – Irrational Theatre | Review London Theatre 1

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It would be easy, but misleading, to call Gustav Holst a dark horse. The austerity that seems to come from photo portraits was no such thing, but rather an aversion to publicity. And while he had no choice but to become famous in the years after the First War as a result of *The Planets*' enormous popularity, it was not a status he had sought.

Ross Hobson and John Stivey – Photo by Bob Simpson

He was in fact a man, and composer, of some wit, even wackiness, as Irrational Theatre's touring production of this early and little-known work has demonstrated. It lands us in a world very far removed from the sweep and dignity of "I Vow To Thee, My Country," the poem by his contemporary, the British diplomat Sir Cecil Spring-Rice which he set, triumphantly, to the tune of *Jupiter*.

What is the idea of *The Idea*? Anarchy would seem to be the answer, or at least a substantial part of it. Here is the court of an enfeebled King, rambling rather in the manner of Alan Bennett's mad George III. With him is his feisty and clown-cheeked queen, first seen pummelling away at a roly poly pudding as if it is some upstart member of the realm's lower orders. In comes the Prime Minister, as full as bluster and blubber as our very own. Best way forward, he says, is to turn the queen into the monarch, simple as that. His motives are, of course, self-seeking, as it is not long before we learn that his plan has a second tier, involving the elevation of the Prime Minister to the throne.

This is almost as much a discovery as a revival of a little-known collaboration between the 22-year-old Holst and his contemporary at the Royal College of Music, Fritz Hart, author of the piece's often sharp and satirical libretto, and in later life a much-travelled polymath of words and music.

This Prime Minister of his has other bright ideas, the kind that Jonathan Swift might have called Modest Proposals. One of these involves the granting to engaged couples of an extra day off per week. This begs, and gets, the question of whether a young man engaged to two women gets two days off, or, if he has a third fiancée, three. Running through this and other spats is the possibility, admittedly faint, of a satire on the relationship between Westminster and The Palace.

It turns out to be a false hope – or fear, depending on your preference – since the presentation of the court is now awash with surrealism. In attendance, for good measure, are a rifle-waving Sentry with ill-defined duties and a voluble wench, the very image of a Jacobean bawd. The result resembles, if you can pardon the implications, a children's tea party on acid. Mad hatters welcome.

Holst's tunes go along with it, remarkably so, with a spiked fluency sometimes not that far removed from Weimar and Weill. If there are grown-ups in this virtual room, these four musicians – keyboard, bass, violin, trumpet – come closest to that role. Holst – Gustav von Holst – is often taken to be A European, in the now faded English sense of that term. Yet he was born in this country. In Cheltenham, for heaven's sake. His wife was the daughter of a respected solicitor. From Cirencester. His father, Adolph von Holst (Swedish and German ancestry) had been choirmaster and organist at All Saints Church in Cheltenham. As a boy, Gustav learnt the violin and the piano, but it was the less conventional trombone that became his main instrument. No less than *The Idea* and its elements, it was a complex picture.

A strange one too, particularly when seen in a pub theatre of enforced half-emptiness. The plague of our times has been merciless to live shows in enclosed spaces. The sense of being in a small and therefore intimate audience is a consolation, albeit a small one. Paula Chitty's direction of this unexpected piece is taut and witty, with John Stivey and Valeria Perboni doing that ongoing English dance of P.M. and H.M. with edge and deftness.



Audience review

Really , really enjoyed your production yesterday. The staging, the engaging production and the costumes were just right - taking us into a pretend story-land world . Excellent cast, who really threw themselves into their parts - and an accomplished band that accompanied the singers. Fascinating to hear this early, very much neglected work by Holst - that is obviously very much influenced by Gilbert and Sullivan.

This light-hearted operetta with it's amusing story-line and tuneful music deserves to be seen and heard - and it was good to have this opportunity to do so. JW