Cruelty struck against Handel

THEATRE
Coram Boy
By Helen Edmundson
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Review: Ron Banks

The 18th century was pretty much a low point when it came to social justice in England.

At one end of the scale you had the uplifting religious choral works of Frideric Handel, who spent much of his time in England, and at the other end you had such appalling issues as slavery, baby snatching and a class structure of egregious snobbery and cruelty.

Most of the elements of this era of iniquity and inequity are at work in the sumptuous, rich, ripe and melodramatic Coram Boy. This is literally a play with music.

Coram Boy begins with one of the worst excesses of the 18th century — the practice of evil men who promised to take illegitimate children to the famous Thomas Coram Foundlings Hospital in London to be brought up in safe, healthy conditions.

In this case it is the malevolently corrupt Otis Gardiner (Aaron Tsindos) who promises a mother her baby will be looked after by the hospital, only to dispatch the child to its death in a shallow grave purely for the profit. This production is determined to pull no punches in showing the evils of the time.

The scene switches swiftly to the Thomas Coram Hospital, where we see the lives of children who have been protected by this august institution — in particular Alexander and Thomas, two boys with musical talents who join the hospital choir.

Handel apparently was a great fan of the hospital, and even gave fundraising concerts of his Messiah for it.

With this historical background available to writer Helen Edmundson, Handel’s music — or a pastiche of it most of the time — is used to help tell the story.

Alexander (an appealing performance by Shubhadra Young) is the rich kid who lives for the idea of music and is desperate not to be sent back home to lord it over the feudal tenants on the family estate like his father.

Working-class foundling Thomas (a likable performance by Megan Holloway) shows a similar talent for music, but is far more accepting about his future than his friend, Alexander.

The fate of these two boys as they negotiate the English class system frames this play and brings the horrors of child-snatching and their terrible consequences into sharper focus.

Coram Boy is in many ways a rollicking period piece, the brutality and cruelty softened in certain scenes by music from the founding choirboys.

The irony of Handel’s sublime music being created at such a time of social cruelty and injustice hits the audience like a blow from a very blunt instrument.

There are coincidences aplenty, of course, in what becomes a saga over two generations of childbirth and illegitimacy, lost children and family redemption.

But these are forgivable in such a sweeping tale, rendered in vivid detail by the cast and crew in the first major theatre production at the academy for the year.

Adding to the richness of the plot is the spectre of the idiot boy Meshak, who swirls through this murky world as victim and redeemer.

Felix Jozeps plays him with a good deal of conviction, becoming a richly imagined character rather than just a plot device and catalyst for other events.

Coram Boy is storytelling at its best, a period piece with a modern sensibility.

Coram Boy ends tomorrow