

**THEATRICAL REVIEW**  
**BY ANITA ATKINSON**

EVENTUALLY, after what seemed like a long six months or so, the community play, *The Bonny Moorhen*, was performed in a makeshift theatre fashioned apparently from dozens of sheep-pens inside Stanhope Show committee's industrial-section shed.

Folk flocked to Unthank showfield over three nights to enjoy a performance by Dalefolk that was nothing short of pure brilliance. *The Bonny Moorhen* could have been a West End production, such was the professional way in which it was produced, acted, played and sung.

So, to the play, written by Jim Woodland, directed by Paddy Burton and inspired by the 1818 Weardale legend, the Battle of Stanhope. No-one can be sure if the story is entirely true but this musical play certainly gave an accurate insight into the lives of struggling leadminers at the beginning of the 19<sup>th</sup> century.

The play opened with a small orchestra of musicians, featuring a few from Stanhope Silver Band, playing beautifully while a small chorus of singers sang beautifully too. Some clever graphics projected on to the screen behind the stage set the scene for a wonderful night of entertainment. The first actor to appear was Alan Anderson, a former professional soldier turned policeman who has recently returned to the Dale to retire. He has never acted before, which surprised me because his portrayal of Joseph Dawson, a not-very-nice poacher turned gamekeeper, was truly amazing.

So, to the storyline, Billy Bell – played by all-round singer, musician, dancer and actor, Tom Burton – is a leadminer working under horrendous conditions for very little pay. The price of lead has fallen dramatically but while the mine owners continue to live in relative luxury, their

employees are starving.

There is talk of a strike, which doesn't curry favour with everyone, least of all Billy's dying father, himself a former leadminer; it is the lead that has affected his lungs. William Bell (Michael Daynes) giving a performance that could have won at least an Emmy had the performance been televised) struggles to breathe through his displeasure at his son's intentions to halt work.

Pat Davison from Frosterley, believably played the long-suffering mother of Billy who was also the sister of George Bell, an ex-soldier in the Napoleonic wars suffering from post-traumatic stress syndrome who influences young Billy. Jeremy Warr, also from Frosterley played his part very well. I have seen him perform before – at the opening of the centennial garden in the village. He breathes life into his characters and makes them believable.

Mary Siddle, mother of two leadminer/poachers, is a pub landlady, ably portrayed by Helen Mills. Helen's two children, Lia and William, also took part in the play. Helen played the Bishop of Durham too in a hilarious scene along with Jonathon Liddle playing his acolyte.

The striking leadminers – because they do down tools – continue to shoot grouse

**Drama**  
**in the Dale**  
**The Bonny Moorhen**

on the moors – colloquially known as the Bonny Moorhen – but the Bishop insists they are HIS birds on HIS lands and remains firmly of the opinion that starving or not, the leadminers are guilty of a crime and should be arrested and prosecuted.

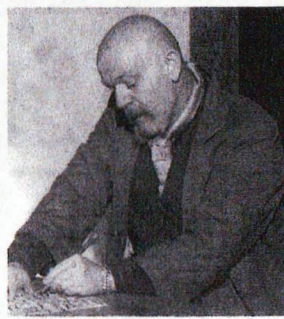
The court scene that ensued had the audience falling about laughing when the judge, played by Steve Thompson, presided over a court case involving a poacher who was very ably defended by teenager, Ruth Haynes from Stanhope. Ruth would make an exceptional lawyer judging by the way she grilled the witness, Adam Heslington. The judge began with a very small gavel and as the defendant frustrated him, proceeded to introduce even bigger ones to great comedy effect.

By far the best actor on stage for me was my young friend, Adam Heslington, from Hill End, Frosterley. I was both amazed and also very moved by the performances he gave. I calculated that he probably had the most lines to learn and he executed them with aplomb and perfect comic timing. He made me laugh out loud and I thoroughly enjoyed watching him perform. Well done, Adam, I was proud of you. In one of Adam's scenes, he appeared alongside his real-life teacher at Wolsingham School, Andrew Fowler. Mr Fowler is head of Expressive Arts at school; has an amazing singing voice and is in demand across the region as a soloist

in oratorio, vocal coach, conductor and instrumentalist. He played in the orchestra in the show and also gave a splendid performance as a miner trying to teach a novice the intricacies of his career – played again by Adam. Brilliant!

Again, Adam was a character in another hilarious scene – set in the foul-smelling mine-shop where miners slept six to a bed in lice-infested mattresses in between shifts. As soon as they rose from the bed, another took their place. It doesn't sound funny, in fact it was the most horrendous of living conditions but Jim Woodland made the scene very, very funny. Kev Robson, whose son, Joseph, ingeniously designed and built the set, and another son, Aidan, acting alongside him, was a bit-part actor whose performance will be talked about for a long time. Maybe he could knit me a few tea cosies?

Laura Emerson played the love interest for Billy Bell, portraying a Methodist preacher of all things! Well, Weardale was – and is – steeped in the religion and it was only right and proper to weave a Methodist storyline. Another funny scene involved Billy and the preacher when Ben Jackson, playing nocturnal grave digger, Sid Gavins, appears through a trapdoor on stage along with a skull! His next



Alan Anderson.

performance could well be in Hamlet. Excellent Ben!

There were other actors taking part, including the Johnson family from Frosterley. Mam, Jackie played the stuck-up Lady Beaumont while ten-year-old twins, Patrick and Catherine played other parts. Hannah Thompson, long-time member of Jackass Youth Theatre, proved again what a versatile performer she is.

The Siddle brothers and other poachers are arrested by the Bishop of Durham's men and apprehended at the Black Bull, Stanhope awaiting transportation to Durham jail when their friends spring them from custody in what has become known in popular legend as the Battle of Stanhope.

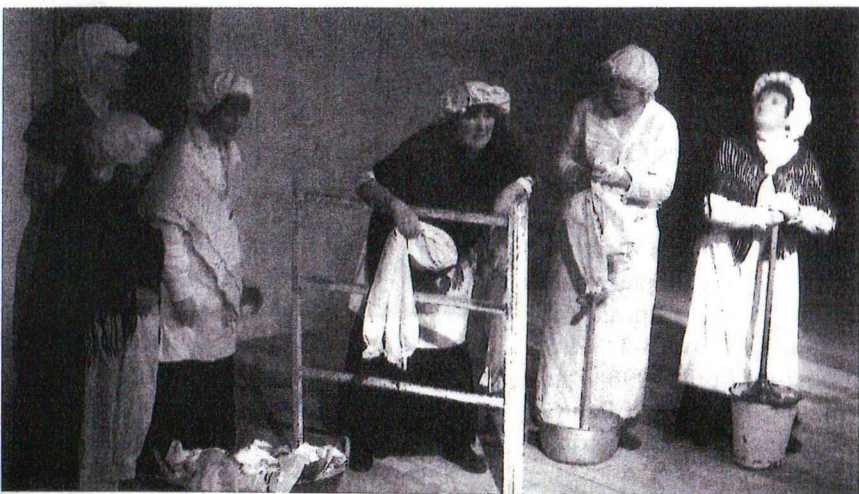
Although this was really the basis of the play, the actual battle on stage lasted no longer than 30 seconds and I thought that for those who didn't know the original story, it would have been a tad confusing. Nevertheless, it didn't detract from the overall enjoyment of the performance – of the music, the singing – glorious singing, especially in the washroom scene (I loved your moves Christine Chamberlain!) – the acting, the laughs. All-in-all, I was very glad I went along. Six months of hard work, £60,000 plus of funding and the promise of a play to involve members of the Weardale public was pulled off successfully. Well done, one and all.



Kev and Aidan Robson.



Orchestra and singers. Below, a scene from the play.



The Bonny Moorhen washer-

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