

The Guardian and Observer 2011 music season

Beached - review

Spa, Bridlington

★★★★☆

Alfred Hickling

guardian.co.uk, Monday 18 July 2011 18.02 BST

[Article history](#)

To read the [viral firestorm that has engulfed Lee Hall and Harvey Brough's opera Beached](#), you may wonder how Opera North thought to avoid controversy by staging a community opera about a homophobic witch-hunt. In the end, of course, Beached turns out to be nothing of the sort. Though there are traces of Britten in the score, it's not the dark, sexualised world of Peter Grimes or Death in Venice, but the innocuous holiday atmosphere of Albert Herring.

Perhaps the single most subversive act that occurs is that a young boy playing a frisky dog pretends to do a poo on the sand. It gets a huge laugh, though no doubt the local authority has a bye-law against that, as well as requiring Hall to substitute the word "queer" for "gay". But to take offence would be like banning [Donald McGill's seaside postcards](#) on the grounds that they are too saucy.

What Hall and Brough have created is a social panorama for 400 local performers featuring squabbling families (who would rather be in Ibiza), slow-moving coach parties of shuffling pensioners and, yes, a gay painter who is picked on by the local yobs, who desist when they mistake him for Alan Bennett.

Brough's score is bouncy, jazzy and surprisingly sophisticated, while Karen Gillingham's production keeps everyone involved, from a primary school chorus of nodding sea anemones to an inspired waltz for shopping trolleys and mobility scooters. Hall's witty libretto acquires a whole new layer of irony when a schoolteacher instructs her charges: "We expect the very pinnacle of educational propriety/ So any funny business and lack of sobriety/ Will result in punishment and instant notoriety." The bad news is that the project, two years in the making, is already over. The good news is that it happened at all.

What a joyful experience

ON SATURDAY, I went to see Opera North's community opera 'Beached', the so-called "gay" opera that has had so much negative publicity recently.

It was an unexpectedly joyful experience. Lots of groups within our community coming together to portray life at the seaside.

Not banal and picture postcard, but with gusto and honesty, involving not just a gay man but also yobs and disaffected families, cute toddlers and young mums, workers, dog walkers, lifeguards, school kids, the learning disabled, joggers and motorised grannies and all having to accept each other's right to be there. It was just as seaside life is.

The set was brilliantly simple, the acting enthusiastic and polished and the direction of movement very effective.

And if any of the language was offensive, I didn't notice because, let's be honest, how many of us can actually hear all words that are sung?

I don't like opera. I didn't really want to go, but I am VERY glad that I did.

Helen Bean, via email,
York Road, Driffield.

LETTER
OF THE
WEEK

Beached – a visual and aural delight

Beached
at Bridlington Spa
Review by Alexa Copeland

MOBILITY scooters whizzing round the Royal Hall, small children inside shopping trolleys and a rather moving song about longshore drift were just some of the visual and aural delights of *Beached*, the opera.

It opened at the Spa on Saturday afternoon and as soon as the story began unfolding, I doubt anybody in the audience was thinking of the national storm it had created just the week before when it had been dramatically cancelled over a row about the word 'queer'.

What a crying shame it would have been if the show hadn't gone ahead because it was a real treat and a production that all involved should rightly be very proud of.

In essence, the story is a simple one; a father taking his two children to Bridlington beach for a holiday, only for his tranquil idyll to be repeatedly interrupted by various colourful characters of the town.

As the drama unfolds, the opera really finds its feet with some fantastic comedic performances, from the day-tripping pensioners to the teenage mums smoking cigarettes while pushing their children around in shopping



Members of the Community Chorus as grandparents in *Beached*.

trolleys.

The real beauty of the show is that whilst the singing, dancing and comedy elements leave you feeling uplifted, there are darker themes interwoven throughout, such as job loss, divorce, isolation and intolerance.

These issues are not lost on the audience, but the majority of the opera is such entertaining fun that there is never the feeling of it getting bogged down by such weighty musings.

At times the stage was completely full, with children, pensioners, teenage 'yobs' and everyone in between joining together for a good sing-a-long and only a real cynic could fail to be entertained by such a spectacle.

From the children of Bay Primary School, to the community choir, the professionals and the Mencap Music and Movement group, *Beached* really is a community celebration encompassing many walks of life - and the fact that one of the characters is a gay professor certainly seemed a minor detail in the context of the overall production.

Indeed, the contested lines were lost on me as not all of Professor Sewerby's verses were clearly audible and I found myself wondering what all the fuss had been about in the first place.

Opera North have achieved wonderful things in bringing such a special show to Bridlington - it is not often one



Richard Burkhard right as the dad, with members of the community cast as Sandra and Jimmy.

gets to enjoy a show with cast ages ranging from two to 82 - and I'm sure it has been a massively memorable experience for all involved.

The only shame were the many empty seats downstairs which made me doubt that any of those who posted their fury about the gay issue on websites across the land actually bothered to come and see what they were talking about with such ferocity.

Because if they had come to see it, there surely would have been no complaints.

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Controversial opera is hailed a huge hit

By Alexa Copeland

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A COMMUNITY opera which sparked national controversy finally went ahead in Bridlington - and proved a huge hit with audiences.

Beached was the conclusion of two-years of work between Opera North, local residents and Bay Primary School - and the triumphant show at Bridlington Spa last Saturday proved a fitting end for all involved.

A fortnight ago the production was overshadowed by controversy when it was initially cancelled the week before it was due to take to the stage.

Its writer, Billy Elliot screenwriter Lee Hall, accused Opera North and the school of homophobia after he was asked to change some of the language in the opera involving a gay character and mentioning the word 'queer'.

The dispute - which was resolved last week with a minor rewrite - made national headlines and there were fears campaigners could disrupt Saturday's shows.

But both performances ran smoothly, with 228 tickets sold for the matinee and 390 for the evening.

Bay Primary headteacher Emma Hobbs said: "It went fantastically well, it was a great success. "It was a really long day for the children but they did incredibly well and the fact that they were so well rehearsed kept them going through both the afternoon and evening shows."



Pupils from Bay Primary School as sea creatures (Pictures by Brian Slater)

Mrs Hobbs said that the school would continue the work of Opera North which saw the children stage their own shows and learn more about the value of singing and performing.

"The opera had been a very small part of the work we have done with them over the last two years, a lot of it has been about building our singing exposure in the school and the legacy Opera North has left us with will definitely continue," she said.

Beached, written by composer Harvey Brough to a text by Lee Hall, starred a cast made up of several local community groups as well as four professional opera singers who played central

characters. And despite the controversy which was reported on nationally, Richard Mantle, general director of Opera North said: "Harvey Brough and Lee Hall are incredible writers and Opera North was delighted to be able to engage artists with such high profiles and credibility for our community project - this is something to celebrate.

"We commissioned a new piece of work with the knowledge that it would be bold and exciting and in the current economic climate where works like this are few and far between, we took a brave step to nurture and broaden the artistic landscape of this community and the talent within it.

"The last two years are a fantastic achievement - we have worked with over 2,700 individuals looking at how singing can be used to address important local issues, such as regeneration.

"*Beached* has been a wonderful opportunity for many of those people to come together and celebrate their town and what they have done together.

"We hope that firm foundations have now been laid for Bridlington to continue its singing journey."

Opera North's Sing Up Bridlington project has involved a total of 2,700 local residents who took part in workshops, concerts and choirs.



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Song and dance over opera ends in chorus of approval

Published on **Monday 18 July 2011 06:00**

After the storm, the calm. A controversial community opera that had been threatened with cancellation went ahead without making waves.

Beached turned out to be the "joyous" event Billy Elliot writer Lee Hall had hoped it would be – although he wasn't there to see its triumph.

The project was put in jeopardy after the writer became embroiled in a war of words with Opera North, East Riding Council and Bridlington's Bay Primary School over claims he had been asked to remove the central gay character from his script.

Opera North and the school insisted a scene where homophobic abuse is shouted at the character, Professor Sewerby, had sparked the problem. In the end the show went on – the offending word "queer" excised from the script.

Cyberspace furore or not, the audience lapped up the exuberant libretto, with music composed by Harvey Brough, which used voracious seagulls, surly teenagers and grannies on mobility scooters to make mayhem out of a day on the beach at "Brid".

The four professionals were given a run for their money by the amateurs – especially the two youngsters, Jimmy (Andrew Studholme) and Sandra, played by 15-year-old Amy Wood. Two years' effort had gone into the piece and the only shame was so many matinee seats were empty.

Dave Hinde, a bass baritone from Bempton, who played the sorely tried beach cleaner, said: "I've heard nothing but positives in terms of how much people have enjoyed this. We feel it's been a great opportunity."

Amy, who has only taken part in school productions up to now, added: "After rehearsals we went down to the beach and spotted the stereotypes from the production – it was quite funny."

Lindsey Porter, from Opera North, was delighted adding: "Hopefully it leaves the community with a feel-good feeling about themselves and the work they have done."

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The Guardian and Observer 2011 music season

Letters

Message of tolerance from Bridlington

[guardian.co.uk](#), Friday 22 July 2011 21:00 BST
[Article history](#)

Last weekend I went to see *Beached* ([Review](#), 19 July). I wanted to see what all the fuss was about, but it also sounded like a good story. I wept, I laughed – I went through every emotion. The teenage mothers with their fags and kids were a scream and this was the first time the audience really relaxed and responded by tremendous applause. The older folks on their mobility scooters enjoyed their moments of complete freedom and the touching love song between two was an eye-watering moment. So much was going on! The tenor – Mark le Brocq – was amazing. He sang clearly, emotionally and was on stage throughout responding to all that was happening. The "special" group were so involved and powerful. Dad, Mum and Teacher were all strong figures, but I it was hard to distinguish the professionals from the others.

Some great characters and, speaking to some afterwards, I realised how much this production had meant to the people of Bridlington. Comments included "I can't think how we can ever match this" and "We've had such a brilliant time". All walks of life were represented. In the morning we walked around the town and spotted the same characters as in the production. The gulls (pinching tourists' food); the intimidating youths with their hoods and baseball caps; the older folks with their joie de vivre and scooters; the noisy children and their costumes; the young mums and their buggies; the dogs and badly behaved owners. All were there to see. I can only hope this excellent production will be reproduced in many towns.

The message of tolerance needs to be made throughout the land. Harvey Brough and Lee Hall should feel proud of their work and the recent controversy demonstrates how important this is.

Tessa Verso

Leamington Spa, Warwickshire