

The Velveteen Rabbit

libretto and music by Simon Chan

first public performance in the
Bar Common Room on 11 March 2001

review published in *Queensland Bar News*, April 2001



Over the years, many diverse and unusual events have taken place in the Bar Association's Common Room, but surely none so delightful as the premiere public performance of Simon Chan's musical version of *The Velveteen Rabbit*. The small audience, in which the librettist and composer's colleagues from the Bar were outnumbered by his friends from the theatrical world, may live to remember the event when both the work and its creator have become household names.

Chan's work is inspired by, rather than being strictly an adaptation of, the first and most popular of about 30 children's books written by Margery Williams (1881-1944). Chan's is not the first attempt to stage Williams' story: at least two other musical versions, one stage play, and one ballet, have all drawn their inspiration from the same text. And it is not difficult to see how Chan and others have been inspired by the uplifting story of a stuffed toy which craves to become real, and achieves that ambition through a small boy's love.

Chan's music is, in a word, masterful. His simple yet memorable melodies are entirely sympathetic to the story, underpinning - rather than distracting attention from - the dramatic development. Even allowing for Chan's advantage of having a very talented ensemble cast, it is apparent that he has a gift for musical theatre which is more than worthy of the professional stage.

The range of musical styles displayed in a production lasting only a little over 30 minutes may seem confusing on paper, but the reality is very different.

After a short instrumental overture, the scene is set with The Dewdrop Fairy's song, *The Velveteen Rabbit*, which is unmistakably operatic in character - not in the imposing coloratura style of, say, Bellini or Donizetti, but with a simpler melody and harmonic progressions more reminiscent of, say, Gluck or Monteverdi. Perhaps this impression is at least partly attributable to the clarity of Sarah Sullivan's superb performance in the role of The Dewdrop Fairy.

The mood and tempo changed entirely with two songs, *Choo-Choo Cha-Cha* and *It Ain't No Rabbit*, both performed by Ralph Devlin (in the separate roles of Steamy the toy battleship and Harold the rabbit) and Katrina Devery (again in separate roles, as Choo-Choo the toy train and Gwenda the rabbit). Devlin's experience in the "Grossmith roles" of the Gilbert and Sullivan repertoire served him well in Steamy's duet with Choo-Choo, containing such sneering lines as:

My ancestors played with Prince Edward the third.
My mother belonged to a Duke.
We're bearers of standard
Both worshipped and pandered
And anything crass makes us puke.

The more raunchy duet between Harold and Gwenda owes much, both in lyrics and tempo, to the jazz tradition, rather in the way that George and Ira Gershwin, or Kurt Weill and Bertolt Brecht, borrowed from the idioms of jazz.

The show's smash hit, however, was surely the song *Real*, performed with great delicacy by Barbara Fordham in the production's title role. Whilst the song's simple yet rhetorical lyrics bring Noel Coward to mind, the plaintive melody could have been written by Andrew Lloyd Webber, by Frederick Loewe, or even by Richard Rodgers at his sentimental best. Inviting the audience to participate in a reprise of this magical song quickly demonstrated the accessibility and catchiness of the tune.

Other memorable features were the songs *One Perfect Day* (Sarah Sullivan as The Dewdrop Fairy), *All Through The Night* (Barbara Fordham as The Velveteen Rabbit), and *The Use of Love* (first performed by Barbara Fordham as The Velveteen Rabbit, and then reprised by Sam Vincent as The Boy).

Richard Wagner - perhaps immodestly - proposed that opera was the highest form of art, combining literature, music and the decorative arts. As this performance was merely a reading, with no stage set and very limited costuming, the decorative arts did not have much of a look in. But the synthesis of literature and music was a joy for everyone who had the privilege to attend.

The traditions of musical theatre, over the last century, have brought together a great diversity of musical forms, from operatic and (so-called) classical music, to folk and popular music, to jazz and even rock music. This panoply is well represented by Chan's work, which seems to take its inspiration from a profound understanding of, and love for, the theatrical music genre. Irving Berlin, Cole Porter or Jerome Kern could have been extremely proud, had their first works to be performed publically exhibited the qualities and promise of Simon Chan's *The Velveteen Rabbit*, or had they been so enthusiastically received by their first audiences.

In a city the size of Brisbane, it should come as no surprise to find people as talented as Simon Chan living in our midst. Yet, to our shame, we tend to assume that anyone with real musical or literary gifts lives interstate or overseas - either because they were born there, or because they have had to move there in order to gain recognition. One can only hope that those responsible for the promotion and funding of art in Queensland will recognise, before it is too late, the benefits of nurturing home-grown talent.

More than a century ago, WS Gilbert eked out an existence at the English Bar, waiting for the break which ultimately came through his immortal partnership with Sir Arthur Sullivan, and the great popular and commercial success of their collaborative works. The Queensland Bar should feel privileged that it, likewise, can provide a home to a man as talented as Simon Chan, until - inevitably - he goes on to achieve a level of fame and success which his erstwhile colleagues at the Bar could only dream of.