

NEW HALF MOON

Nicholas de Jongh

The Dream

AS A practising if not fully-fledged romantic, I do not take to a heavyish rock version of *The Midsummer Night's Dream*, particularly one where almost all the emphasis is laid upon percussion, pounding keyboards, and some vehement drums rather than lyric guitars. Any hint of magic, moonlight or late Sixties' psychedelic imaginations are worlds away, save for a burst of strobe lighting and an initial pull of smoke from which a plump black female Puck emerges to sing, "They don't believe in me."

But the intention of the lyricist-musical director Helen Webb and the band-leader Kim Burgess seems to have been to place this *Dream* in two centuries: the 14 songs are interspersed with a straight rendering of the original text. And the only other modernising touches are discovered in the costumes—a jump suit for Puck, Lysander and Demetrius black—garbed punkish, Hermia in similar hue but in a dress decorated in pink letters.

The discordances would not matter much, or at all, if either the musical aspect or the Shakespeare came across on this bare stage (the band at the side) with more coherent effect. Lysander and Hermia lamenting that "The course of true love never did run smooth" are given lyrics and attitudes suitable for doomed lovers. And Peter This, who emerges from the band to be a convincing cockney-punk Bottom, has in *Rock/Bottom* a song that sounds well for the rude and lumbering mechanicals.

Otherwise, the songs (apart from a joyful *Calypas*) burst upon the action with no good reason and the moods that they convey do not have much to do with midsummer madness and desire. The director, Lewis Barber, allows the mechanicals to proceed to hectic burlesque, while the quartet of lovers, John Wilson's vehement Lysander aside, are very perfunctory. And since Carla Drayton's Puck is rather leaden the magic games and mistakes matter little.

When it comes to the over-seeing Theseus and the King and Queen of the Fairies, strange pantomime takes over: Douglas Lambert plays Theseus inexplicably as an Irish tramp and Oberon in an American valley of words, while Jan Servain's Titania is charmingly at another remove—as a Penella Fielding clone.

RONNIE SCOTT'S

John Fordham

Monty Alexander

EVERYTHING about Monty Alexander is ambiguous except his playing. His name puts you in mind of a trombone playing New Orleans revivalist music in a Streatham pub. His actual antecedents in Jamaica suggest virorous and danceable eccentricities.

But in his opening performance this week, Alexander—a spruce, affable, bearded young man, who appears with a bassist and a head drummer—was surprisingly orderly and formal, while his accompanists struck such sparks as were on offer.

On ballads Alexander is precise, almost pugnacious, and far from the lush orchestral style his reputation suggests, plays in a dewy, Bill Evans manner, particularly in piquant, briefly-struck chords that ripple like water broken by stones. On up-tempo pieces, particularly blues, he plays fast, pummeling bebop in the authentically streamlined Bud Powell manner of legions of keyboard players over the past 20 years. That idiom is given an unexpected twist, though, by the drumming of Robert Thomas Junr. Thomas plays congas and cymbals largely without sticks, which gives the rhythm a mellow, swirling quality, quite unlike the customary bebop percussion which often sounds like someone shaking a bag of loose change.

Alexander is fond of pieces that shift tempos and one of his briskest outings was a nervous-sounding tune that I recall from an old Wes Montgomery session as being appropriately titled *The Trick Bag* and which sounds like somebody erratically belabouring a door knocker.

It sweeps from this stentorian clattering into an open season for improvising that led Alexander to play his most flowing solo of the set, and unleashed a wonderfully mischievous, smack-on-the-beat bass solo from Brian Bromberg. It was hard to escape the impression, though, that the leader had made up his mind what his music amounted to rather than his partner's—never a good idea in jazz.

COMMONWEALTH INSTITUTE

Kenneth Rea

Ancestral Voices

MUSIC and dance by Lamas from the Rumtek Monastery in Sikkim may not sound like an evening's night out, but this programme, which opens a festival of Himalayan art, offers such a rare and exotic experience that anyone with the remotest interest in other cultures should not miss it.

The evening begins with an extraordinary invocation played on long trumpet-like instruments that produce continuous waves of hypnotic sounds. Then, in beautifully embroidered costumes that look like museum pieces (the kind of thing a Chinese Emperor would have been happy with) eight dancers weaved their way on stage and into the circular patterns of their ritual dance. They turn and pivot, they wave their arms in smaller circles.

A programme note tells that the dancers are both a meditation and an exorcism to evict evil spirits from the old year and welcome good spirits to the new year. This is clearest in the final item when two rows of dancers, one in red masks and the other white, drum at each other in a stylised combat that ends in a frenzy of leaping and drumming. Because the movements seem to be chosen for their ritual and symbolic meaning rather than dramatic effect, there is perhaps more benefit to be had from performing these dances than from watching them.

This is an interesting distinction, because there is no pretence, no illusion or characterisation as there would be in Balinese mask dance. Nor is there the economy and precision that you would find in Noh. It is as if these ritual movements were frozen in time and never evolved into a dramatic art as so many dancers did. The dancers are sharing a meditation which happens to be highly watchable. They also give us a fascinating insight into a tradition both ancient and totally unspoiled.

MORLEY COLLEGE

Hugo Cole

Morley CO

COLST'S 20-minute *Wandering Scholar*, with its witty libretto by Clifford Bax, is a model of brisk and purposeful story-telling. Opera being a self-indulgent medium, it is hard to believe that the work would ever make much impression in the theatre; but Morley College's performance, given with schematic action and explanatory placards in the small community centre hall had the great advantages that we could hear all the words and that the four singers from the Royal College of Music could sing in chamber music style.

Good performances all round, and particularly from Norma Anderson as the faithless wife and Wills Morgan as the scholar. The Morley Chamber Orchestra under Lawrence Leonard hit some rough passages in music that is as spare and contrapuntal as Britten's church opera. But vigorous and colourful music by Kodaly and Janacek was played with much confidence and a good sense of ensemble.

It was a pleasure to renew acquaintance with David Suman-Anderson's *Shade There Never Was . . .*, which must be one of the few serious contemporary pieces that an amateur orchestra could bring off convincingly, being almost continually euphonious and slow-moving.

Fragments of Handel's *Largo* float in and out, looking for their beginnings, ends and accustomed harmonies and in the process create a new music of their own. The very slowness and deliberation of the searching process persuades them to concentrate harder than in many hyper-active contemporary works. A remarkable trick, brought off with great assurance.