

Dome provides the perfect elixir for opera

The magical gardens of Belcombe Court in Bradford on Avon played host to this year's 2019 Iford Arts Festival. Aly Balsom enjoys an evening of picnicking and opera in the grounds.



PHOTO BY PAUL WEILAND

AS YOU walk in front of the Georgian facade of Belcombe Court and the garden opens up to reveal a large, white dome, framed by the serpentine lake and rotunda, it's hard not to get caught up in the romance of the view.

Candlelit lanterns edge the lake, whilst white linen table cloths blow gently in the wind on tables frequented by people enjoying a picnic supper before the opera begins. Others sit on

blankets on the grass or on chairs they've carried from the car. There are some various spots to choose from; some sit at the back of the house, overlooking the lake, others next to the summer house or on the parkland next to the cottage ornate. Everyone is helped to their chosen spot by a team of young helpers. They carry picnic hampers, chairs and blankets for grateful guests who "wow" at their surroundings.

The modern, white, geodesic dome is a talking point because it is in such contrast

to the rococo garden that surrounds it. The dome is a purpose-built structure for Iford Arts' summer opera. Over August and September, the dome played host to a prom with Claire Teal and her jazz trio, a concert with new generation artists and four performances of the opera, *L'elisir d'amore* or *The Love Potion*.

Above: picnics on the lawn with the geodesic dome as a backdrop

Iford comes to Belcombe

It's the first time Iford Arts has come to Belcombe Court – and at the time of writing it is undecided as to whether it will return. Up until last year, Iford Manor in nearby Iford was their home. However, after outgrowing the site, the charity looked for a new temporary setting and settled on Belcombe Court and the Bath Guildhall, which staged *Die Fledermaus*.

Belcombe Court is the home of director and OBE Paul Weiland and wife Caroline, a psychotherapist. Paul has numerous accolades under his belt, including directing *Blackadder* and *Mr Bean*. The garden is his labour of love and you get the feeling he approached the preparations for Iford Arts in a similar way to staging one of his films.

"We've been trying to blow everyone away with how pretty it looks," he tells me at the start of the night. "It's a very spiritual, romantic place. In a way, the opera lends itself to this environment. And that's what we're trying to create – something that doesn't look like it's over-considered. But boy, is it considered!"

Setting the scene

The time and effort put into the gardens by Paul, Caroline and their team of gardeners is not lost on the 240 guests attending *L'elisir d'amore*.

Dine Romero and daughter, Emily Romero Shaw headed to the event from Bath. They chose to enjoy their picnic of crusty bread and warm tomato soup in a spot on the grass overlooking the house, lake and rotunda. "It's gorgeous, it's really lovely. We went up to the terraced garden and then came across this and thought we needed to stop immediately," says Dine.

Nineteen-year-old Emily was keen to get her first opera experience at Belcombe Court. "I really enjoy ballet and I thought I'd enjoy something classical," she says.

Nick and Charlotte Dent from Kington Langley, Wiltshire, had pre-ordered a picnic through Widbrook Grange in Bradford on Avon. They enjoyed their three-course meal, including a bottle of Bollinger, on a table in front of the summer house. "It's like being in a restaurant outside," says Charlotte.

This was the first time the pair had attended an event from Iford Arts. They were both struck by the beauty of Belcombe Court. "The venue is fabulous, absolutely stunning. It's a place you don't get to see often. Every corner you go around, there's such an amazing vista," Nick says.

As the bell sounds across the gardens, the opera goes start their procession into the dome. Inside, guests are seated surrounding the stage in the centre. It's this set-up or 'performing in the round' which Iford Arts prides itself on. This, combined with performing in English, makes it an intimate and accessible opera.



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The opera

The dome also makes for an enjoyable place to perform, according to leading lady, Claire Lees who plays Adina in *L'elisir d'amore*. "The acoustics in the dome are surprisingly good. We were all a little worried, but when we got to the space it was a very pleasant surprise," she said. "Bradford on Avon is a beautiful location; a little haven away from London."

'The dome contrasts with the rococo garden'

L'elisir d'amore is a hugely entertaining 'Rom Com', with laugh out loud moments, mixed with melancholy scenes. The performance is accompanied by music from the orchestra, Chroma, conducted by Oliver Gooch, music director of Iford Opera.

The opera is set around 1920 in the heat of the Californian orange belt. Quiet, unassuming Nemorino, played by Robert Lewis, pines for beautiful Adina. Adina owns and runs an orange grove and sells juice to tourists from a stand on the highway. She is seen telling her workforce about the book she is reading where Tristan wins the heart of Isolde by drinking a magic love potion.

The pompous sergeant Belcore then appears on the scene, immediately falls for Adina and asks her to marry him. Adina is in no hurry to decide, but Nemorino is in despair and Adina appears to have no interest in him romantically.

Dr Dulcamara then appears offering various potions to fix all manner of complaints. It's Dr Dulcamara who brings the house down as he struts on stage wearing a white suit and 10-gallon hat – which is so large it's more like a one-tonne hat. He promises the orange grove workers that his medicines will "tighten sagging" and mean that "even ageing geezas will be feeling pretty hot".

After hearing the claims, Nemorino shyly asks if he has a love potion. Of course, Dr Dulcamara does not, but he does have some red wine that he sells to unsuspecting Nemorino (who is told it will take 24 hours to work). Nemorino feels the effects of his 'medicine' and decides to feign indifference to Adina who is hurt and then agrees to marry the sergeant.

Nemorino decides to buy more 'love potion' but has to enlist in the army to get enough money to do so. His second dose, just so happens to coincide with him inheriting a fortune from his sick uncle, causing young women to throw themselves at him. He obviously thinks the potion has worked. Adina then learns he is to be sent away with the army. The pair then share their emotions in a powerful scene where the music builds to a crescendo before they eventually declare their love for each other.

Reception

The performance is met with rapturous applause from the opera goers. After the curtain fall, people weave their way back through the candlelit garden, reflecting on a magical evening – or perhaps where they can get hold of one of Dr Dulcamara's potions. **WL**

Above: the dome's acoustics made for an enjoyable experience for cast and audience