



Robert Hoffmann
and Andrew Foote

Batman returns

Andrew Foote gets set for another Opera in the Park — this time as director, writes **William Yeoman**

Twenty years ago Perth baritone Andrew Foote sang the title role in a concert performance of Johann Strauss' operetta *Die Fledermaus* (The Bat) for WA Opera's first Opera in the Park. Now Batman returns for another Opera in the Park production of the same work — but this time he's directing.

"I've done about 10 Operas in the Park since that first one," says the now-seasoned performer but first-time director, "as well as plenty of other outdoor concerts. So I know personally how to deal with the pain-in-the-backside elements of having to sing outdoors."

Recently Opera in the Park has featured such top-shelf bonbons as Gilbert & Sullivan's *The Mikado* and Offenbach's *Orpheus in the Underworld*. But when it comes to operetta, the Austrian angle is hard to beat, especially when it comes to Johann Strauss' masterpiece, *Die Fledermaus*.

Of course the plot is as silly as the music is sparkling, and revolves around a slew of mistaken identities and a plan by the "bat" of the title, Dr Falke (Robert Hoffman following in Foote's footsteps — the epithet is down to a fancy-dress costume once worn by Falke) to humiliate his friend Eisenstein (David Hobson) at a ball to be given by a young Russian prince (Louise Fenbury). Meanwhile Eisenstein's wife Rosalinde (Katja Webb) cavorts with her lover Alfred (David Woodward) while her maid Adele (Jennifer Barrington) and Adele's sister Ida (Lucy Mervik) also come to the party, so to speak.

Foote says Opera in the Park has always been a valuable training ground for younger artists: "They can test themselves in a safe environment and really show what they can

do. And they get to work with experienced professionals such as David (Hobson)."

Hobson is also experienced in front of the camera, which will make him even more of a mentor to the younger singers, as the performance is to be relayed live to regional centres around WA.

"I'm treating this less as a concert and more as a television production," says Foote. "In other words, everyone is going to have to try to sing to the TV camera as well."

Foote says this fact, plus the sizeable audience expected at the popular free outdoor event, means a director needs to focus on clarity and simplicity.

"You need to get to the guts of the story and tell it as cleanly as possible while never forgetting that the music is the most important thing," he says.

Foote recalls singing in the first Opera in the Park. "For me it was all new. I hadn't even gone full-time at that point as a singer; I was still working as a public servant.

"But it was literally just a concert. You turned up in your tux or evening frock, stood in front of a microphone and a music stand and just sang."

Does he think Opera in the Park audiences have changed? "Frankly I don't think they have. The audiences we're getting at Opera in the Park now are exactly the same as we were getting 20 years ago. It's basically families and first-time opera goers. And they always have a wonderful time."

The WA Opera conducted by Nicholas Milton performs *Die Fledermaus* in the Supreme Court Gardens at 8pm on Saturday February 5. Free admission.