

The Opera Festival 2011

Tête à Tête at Riverside Studios, London W6, August 5-21

This year's August was unusually busy for London's opera-goers. Although dance had taken over at the two big houses, Opera Holland Park was going strong. Glyndebourne—along with the other country-house companies—beckoned to those who could afford it.

In London itself, among much else, Grimeborn Opera played an adventurous season at the Arcola Theatre in Hackney, and OperaUpClose another at the King's Head in Islington. (All three companies did *The Turn of the Screw*: top price £200 in Sussex, £15 in London.) Amid much else, for the fifth Tête à Tête Opera Festival in Hammersmith's Riverside Studios, Bill Banks-Jones had assembled a programme of more than 40 events, most of them given twice, across three extended, Thursday-to-Sunday weekends. They ranged from hour-long operas and works-in-progress to song cycles with varying degrees of dramatic content. Riverside's Stygian studio-theatres, heavily black-draped, black-floored, black-ceilinged, were often brightened by what happened within them. I heard not all but most of it. It would be easy to fill 20 pages or so about what was done, and about some of the contradictory or complementary paths that opera is taking. I'll focus on what was notable.

Glyndebourne Youth Opera and the Welsh National Youth Opera had been invited to show recent work. The brio and confidence of the young performers and their aplomb in tackling chorus-operas that were often rhythmically and polyphonically intricate, with numerous solos, was exhilarating. Glyndebourne offered a double bill. Orlando Gough's *On Off* (words 'by the company') was a spirited critical satire on consumerism, cries of 'Starbucks' and 'McDonald's' providing perhaps rather obvious targets. Hannah Conway's *When I Am Old* (words by Hazel Gould) was a powerful dramatization of Israeli atrocity in Gaza, prefaced by and growing from a filmed memory-monologue spoken by a Palestinian woman. It was soberly but stirringly composed. Conway conducted, and Karen Gillingham directed. The Welsh offering, Stephen Deazley's *The Sleeper* (words by Michael Symmons Roberts), was an odd fantasy set in a future time when all but one man have lost the ability to sleep. 'Suitable for ages 12 and up', said the programme. I found it hard to follow ('What happens to society when our most human needs are denied?' provided a clue) but fascinating, and it was well performed: good young voices, with phrases of full, clear soprano choral tone that was in itself moving.

A serious, impassioned note was struck again by the paired monodramas making up *The City Weeps*, in which 'a lamenting solo voice is accompanied by a complex sound-

■ Frances M. Lynch in Alejandro Viñao's 'Baghdad Monologue' at the 2011 Tête à Tête Opera Festival



scape of diverse voices and the plucked-string sounds of an ancient lyre, echoing from every corner of the electronic space'. In Alejandro Viñao's *Baghdad Monologue*, 'infamous words' and images of Bush and Blair form part of the collage. Alexander Lovett's *Lonely Sits the City*, its text from Lamentations, then places the invasion of Iraq within the long, tragic history of recurrent destruction, suffering, mourning and survival. Frances M. Lynch was both the artistic

director and the remarkable protagonist: a compelling presence, and a singer uniting an extended range of controlled, contrasting timbres, steadiness of note, sure breath control, and potent, poignant phrasing.

Thomas Hardy proves hard to set (Finzi and Britten are exceptions); and the Hardy operas—Erlanger's *Tess* in 1906, more recent examples by Peter Tranchell, Edward Harper, Stephen Paulus—have not lasted long. Hardy's *The Withered Arm*, a masterly novella in nine brief chapters, almost a mini-*Tess* in its wronged-woman matter, was written for the magazine *Blackwood's* and is akin to Henry James's *The Turn of the Screw* (written for *Collier's*) in its deliberately ambiguous, unexplained presentation of supernatural happenings. The first act and two numbers from the second of Jenny Gould's opera-in-the-making *The Withered Arm* were played at Riverside, and audience comments were invited. Here are mine. I thought Rachel Barnett's recasting of the tale as a libretto skilful in basic construction but sometimes too wordy—for example, the long 'sola, abbandonata' soliloquy for the heroine. I thought Gould's music honest and agreeable but sometimes too bland, too conventionally 'English-pastoral' in tone for Hardy's powerful tale. The performers—Janet Fischer as Rhoda Brook, Dan Miller as her seducer, James Willis their son, Lucy Roberts the new bride—were able.

The rest in brief: Gavin Wayne's Kafka sketch *Metamorphosis*—with the baritone Marcus Farnsworth and the composer at the piano—was engaging. *Wanderlust* was a camp cabaret act from Ezra Axelrod, murmuring his songs and chatting to us through a microphone, but accompanied by the most attractive, high-heeled string quartet (the Raven) and double bassist (Lowri Morgan) I've ever seen—fine players, too. In Stephen Mitchell's *Daughters of the Elements*, a song-cycle for three voices and more-or-less the *Pierrot* quintet (but harp and percussion instead of piano), Katherine Bond was a Marie Curie dignified in presence and eloquent in utterance, with Mary Plazas and Lucy Schauer as her daughters. The idea was interesting, the music unmemorable. Music hardly 'came first' in many of the events, but it was arresting in the latest instalment of Nigel Osborne's Esenin tributes, *Remembering ... Forgetting*, a cycle for bass (Michael Popper, also an acrobatic dancer), cello and piano. Christopher Diffey, in Robert Folden's *Love Songs*, provided a model of how to put a song across, bring it to life. Mara Carlyle, in Emily Hall's *Life Cycle*, 'a set of songs about love, loss, and sleep deprivation', showed how dull songs can sound when, before a live audience, they are addressed to a music stand, and when the words (despite miking) are unclear. ANDREW PORTER