

## Opera

### Tête à Tête

Riverside Studios, W6

★★★★☆

With around 30 new, workshopped or half-finished little operas on display over three long weekends, Bill Bankes-Jones's admirable Tête à Tête festival will always be a lottery for the punter. I can't say that I won the jackpot on Saturday night, but I think I bagged a couple of minor prizes.

Ergo Phizmiz proudly announced in the programme that his work, *The Third Policeman*, was "rejected for arts funding at an early stage", and I can see why. Sung by untrained voices, acted in the hammiest traditions of am-dram, and completely wacky in concept, it doesn't tick many Arts Council boxes. Nevertheless, it is great fun. Not only is it relatively faithful to Flann O'Brien's dark absurdist masterpiece (though necessarily selective in detail), it also captures the novel's comic incongruity and its narrator's sense of being trapped in a hellish time-warp.

Phizmiz's score is a collage of splendidly vulgar patter-songs, 1930s light music, Verdi, Sullivan's *The Lost Chord* (hinting at O'Brien's theological subtext, perhaps), techno beats, and other sampled sounds. Similarly, his staging — designed by Martha Moopette with paintings by Bryan Innes Parker — is a frantic mixture of grotesque costumes (I loved the pig-headed policemen), Gilliam-like animated cartoons and puppet shadow-plays. And though the production seems ramshackle, it works — mad but mesmerising.

Far more conventional but no less effective, Stephen McNeff's *Daughters of the Elements* (simply but touchingly staged by Bankes-Jones) depicts Marie Curie and her two daughters reminiscing about Curie's laboratory breakthroughs, her marriage, and her brief affair with a married scientist that scandalised Paris. With McNeff's delicate instrumentation evocatively realised by the Chroma Ensemble under Robin Newton, and every word made crystal clear by Mary Plazas, Katherine Bond and especially Lucy Schauer as Marie, the work emerges as an autumnal but lyrical song-cycle counterpointing the certainties of science against the unfathomable and often painful complexities of human behaviour.

Caroline Heslop's *Voicing* drew from history, too: the interviews with Victorian paupers in Henry Mayhew's classic *London Labour and the London Poor*, interspersed with modern-day minimum-wagers saying much the same thing. Staged by Julie Osman with a few Brechtian touches and a lot of symbolic cardboard boxes, it was sociologically interesting but musically dreadful, despite some powerful singing by Merryn Gamba.

**Richard Morrison**