

# Tête à Tête

## Blind Date November 2007



## Evaluation

## Introduction and Aims

*Blind Date* was an evening of six, fifteen minute long operas. The show was premiered at the Riverside Studios in Hammersmith on November 12, 2007 before a further 4 performances at the Riverside and then a tour to 5 other venues around England with a good geographical spread.

Each opera had been written by a different pairing of composer and librettist with 3 of the pairings having worked together before, 3 drawn together for the first time for this production. Each pairing had been given the brief of writing a ten to fifteen minute opera that would form part of a production under the title '*Blind Date*'. Each opera was performed by the same line up with 3 singers, soprano, mezzo soprano and baritone and 7 musicians from Tête à Tête's associate ensemble, Chroma.

The ethos behind *Blind Date's* use of multiple creators can be seen to be a part of a common thread running through recent work by Tête à Tête. From Speed Dating, through Line Dancing and into the recent inaugural opera festival, there is a desire to broaden partnerships and involve many new people in the creation of new opera. Several of the pairings for *Blind Date* had come about through Speed Dating and Line Dancing and those that were previous pairings had been refreshed by these events. The festival played a big part in the development of the production, providing 5 weeks of workshops on *Blind Date* as well as the opportunity for test runs in a live setting.

The specific company aims relating to the production of *Blind Date* were:

1. To enable commissions from a number of diverse composers and librettists with the widest possible brief: write an opera to be part of *Blind Date*.
2. To offer audiences a mix of what new opera can be.
3. Cement a very strategic touring circuit in separate regions of the country to widen opportunity for audiences nationwide to see Tête à Tête's work.
4. To be true to Tête à Tête's mission and vision.

## Outcomes

In its final form, *Blind Date* consisted of 6 short operas

*Anger* (1<sup>st</sup> public performance)

Words: Meredith Oakes

Music: Julian Grant

*on such a day* (premiere)

Words: Philip Ridley

Music: Anna Meredith

*The Feathered Friend* (premiere)

Words: Alasdair Middleton

Music: Helen Chadwick

*The Big But* (premiere)

Words: Jonzi-D

Music: Jason Yarde

*Houses* (premiere)

Words: Christopher Mayo & Christopher Crebolder

Music: Christopher Mayo

*Nyanyushka* (premiere)

Words: Simon Nicholson

Music: Gary Carpenter

Julian Grant and Meredith Oakes's *Anger* was a late substitution into the programme. Originally a work called *found in synchrony* by Matt Rogers had been in development. However, this was removed by mutual agreement with the composer. Bill Bankes-Jones supplies the reason for this –

*“Though Matt's music on the basis of which we commissioned him was brilliantly dramatic, the mutual feeling was, in trying to achieve what he was after, he had created a piece that was without characterisation or drama, and therefore by definition undramatic, and yet would be artistically compromised to the point of collapse were he to try and work these elements into it, as we found when we tried to do so in the public workshops.”*

A similar problem had occurred with Anna Meredith's piece. The music she had written was complex to the point that trying to fit dramatic elements to it had proved extremely difficult. The effective solution was to remove the physical dramatic elements and present a more static visual piece.

However, straight away it can be seen that *Tête à Tête* has met the first 2 of the specific aims for the production. 5 of the 6 works performed were new works and all *Tête à Tête* commissions. *Tête à Tête* ensured the audience were offered a mix of what new opera could be by the fact that these commissions were from creators with a range of backgrounds – from emerging classical composers, to singer/songwriters to jazz and hip hop artists.

The production received 13 performances in all. Details, including audience figures (shown in brackets) are given below.

London - Riverside Studios

12 Nov (52), 13 Nov (116), 15 Nov (47), 16 Nov (66), 18 Nov (92)

Birmingham – Alexandra Theatre

20 Nov (57)

Newbury - Corn Exchange

21 Nov (66)

Cambridge – Arts Theatre

23 Nov (122), 24 Nov (169)

Manchester – RNCM

26 Nov (37), 27 Nov (24)

Bath – Theatre Royal

29 Nov (36), 30 Nov (38)

In total, 922 people attended, an average of 71 per show.

## Evaluation

Evaluation was by feedback forms given for completion by audience members, performers and venue staff.

Audience forms were a simplified version of those used for the Festival, with audience members asked to rate artistic aspects of the show and aspects of service they received from the venue via a scoring system. They were not asked to provide qualitative feedback or comment.

Performers and production staff were given a similar scoring system, but also the opportunity to offer comment.

Venue feedback was via a simple form with 5 questions inviting comment.

## Audience Feedback

In total 87 forms were completed, representing a total of 9.4% of tickets sold. This percentage is similar to response rates from previous evaluations. However, given the form is simpler than has been used before it is disappointing not to see more filled in. Some thought may still need to go into the design of the evaluation form.

## Artistic feedback

Respondents were asked to rate elements of the production on a scale of 1 – 5 with one being Strongly Disliked and 5 being Strongly Liked.

The elements considered were music, words, singing, direction, acting and costumes and set. The results break down as follows

<b>Element</b>	<b>Rating 4 or 5 (liked or strongly liked)</b>	<b>Rating 1 or 2 (strongly disliked or disliked)</b>
Music	92%	1%
Words	86%	0%
Singing	98%	0%
Direction	91%	1%
Acting	95%	0%
Costumes/set	89%	1%

The figures here show very strong approval ratings in every area. It would be safe to say the production was extremely well received, the production was perceived as of a very high quality and that the respondents were very satisfied with the experience.

Virtually no dissatisfaction was expressed with any element of the production and in fact no-one had entered a 1 (strongly disliked) for any element of the production.

For those entering 4s & 5s, the split is mainly 50/50 for each element. However, the elements attracting strongest approval were the singing and acting. For both of these, around 70% of respondents had scored them at 5 (strongly liked).

These figures measure well against aim 4 for the production – to be true to Tête à Tête’s mission and vision:

“Tête à Tête’s mission is to bring uplifting, surprising, daring and intimate opera productions of the highest quality to the widest possible public.”

Vision: “To be known as the company that shows how challenging opera can be a great night out for anyone”

In terms of quality and providing a great night out, the figures above show that this was achieved very successfully.

## **Audience Demographics**

The collated figures do give an insight into Tête à Tête's general audience.

### ***Previous experience with opera***

A series of questions were asked to ascertain respondents' previous experience with opera. These figures break down as follows.

*When did the respondent last see an opera?*

In the last 6 months	51%
In the last year	19%
In the last 5 years	26%
Never	4%

This was not an audience that was new to opera. 96% of respondents had seen an opera before and just over half of them could be considered regular opera goers. These figures are very similar to the breakdown of answers for the same question put to festival attendees.

*When did the respondent last see a new opera?*

In the last 6 months	25%
In the last year	15%
In the last 5 years	26%
Never	34%

In common again with the same question asked of festival goers, the breakdown shows that although Tête à Tête may not have been successful in pulling in an audience new to opera, they were more successful in introducing people to new opera. These figures are actually slightly better than those for the festival with a third of respondents having never seen a new opera here compared to a quarter for the festival.

There are two factors this improvement can be attributed to. The first is that a finished product was being shown here rather than the 'work in progress' experimental nature of that shown in the festival. It was therefore more likely that a less daring and seasoned audience would be attracted.

The second stems from an assertion by one of the venue managers that Tête à Tête were showing an original performance of a type few are taking outside London. Given the number of performances outside London it may be that it was being shown to people who had had less opportunity to see work of this kind.

*When did the respondent last see a Tête à Tête production?*

In the last year	22%
In the last 5 years	7%
Never	71%

There are two conclusions that can be drawn here.

For those that had previously seen a Tête à Tête production, the majority have attended in the past year. This shows that Tête à Tête has a core audience who prepared to regularly attend new productions.

The number who have not previously seen a Tête à Tête production is very encouraging as it shows that a new audience has been reached. However, given the production was taken to a number of venues not (yet) regularly used by the company, this is not surprising and it would be disappointing if these figures were not as they are.

However, as with the festival evaluation, if the answers to this question and the previous one are taken alongside the overwhelmingly positive approval ratings it can be argued that *Blind Date* was successful in providing a positive first experience, both to new opera and to Tête à Tête's work. This measures up to the aims for the production and the vision of the company. In particular:

- to "Cement a very strategic touring circuit...to widen opportunity for audiences nationwide to see Tête à Tête's work"
- "To be known as the company that shows how challenging opera can be a great night out for anyone"

To add to this, a very encouraging 60% of respondents have given their details for the mailing list with a further 12% indicating they are already on the list. This provides further evidence that the production was instrumental in building an audience. People actively want information on Tête à Tête's future work and this suggests they are very likely to attend a future production.

### **Age range**

under 16	1%
17-22	8.5%
23-28	8.5%
29-45	34%
46-55	11%
56-65	26%
66+	11%

This shows a reasonable spread with the largest group in the 29-45 bracket. As with the festival, half of the respondents were under 45. This shows Tête à Tête is appealing to a younger group than the perceived audience for opera. Figures for those under 28 suggest there is room for attracting a younger audience still, particularly given several of the venues visited have high local student populations.

Respondents were asked to indicate their ethnicity. Many respondents have either declined (40%) to answer this question or given an indeterminate or comedy answer (19%). The remainder have answered white Caucasian (35%) and Afro-Caribbean (6%). Given the number of non answers to this question, it is hard to draw any definite conclusions. However, it is encouraging to see that for those that have given a definite response it was not exclusively a white Caucasian audience.

### **Marketing**

Respondents were asked to say how they had heard about the show.

Venue marketing	12%
Tete a Tete mailing list	12%
Picked up leaflet	10%
Newspaper	4%
email about show	10%
word of mouth	35%
someone else booked	17%

As with the evaluation data from the festival, the simplest form of marketing - word of mouth - plays a very important part in bringing in an audience.

Newspaper figures are disappointingly low and it may be worth examining what impact the PR campaign had in getting information/previews into local, national newspapers and listings.

Other figures show a fairly even spread and it is good to see the mailing list put in a strong showing. The venue marketing figure seems lower than might be expected however. Given that a good number of the shows took place outside London and therefore out of the reach of most of the mailing list, it should be expected that venue marketing should show as playing a bigger part in drawing the audience. The fact that it doesn't suggests there needs to be some thought put into getting venues to work harder in bringing in their audience. It is certainly something that needs to be addressed if the venues concerned are to be truly brought on board as part of a strategic touring circuit for Tête à Tête.

### **Service**

Respondents were asked to score various non artistic aspects of their experience. As they were only asked to rate these if they had had direct experience of them, sample sizes are low with some of the elements and so a degree of caution is necessary in interpreting the figures.

Issues related to the venue and to booking score highly:

<b>Element</b>	<b>Rating 4 or 5 (liked or strongly liked)</b>	<b>Rating 1 or 2 (strongly disliked or disliked)</b>	<b>No. of respondents</b>
Venue	92%	0%	65
Booking online	70%	10%	10
Phone booking	82%	16%	25

The venue question is particularly important given the aim to cement a strategic touring circuit. From the audience point of view, no respondents indicated a problem with the venues. The figures for booking do not indicate any real problems. Given the response rates here it was only a very small number of individuals that had a problem.

Issues relating to print material and ticket price also score highly:

<b>Element</b>	<b>Rating 4 or 5 (liked or strongly liked)</b>	<b>Rating 1 or 2 (strongly disliked or disliked)</b>	<b>No. of respondents</b>
Marketing info	76%	5%	37
Programme info	93%	2%	49
Ticket price	86%	3%	62

Again, given the number of respondents, those scoring 1 or 2 represent only a few individuals. It is good to see a strong endorsement for the programme. This was an element that scored less well in the Festival evaluation. This does not appear to be the case here. Ticket prices appear to have been well pitched.

### **Artist feedback**

Feedback was invited from both opera creators and performers. Both groups were given the same evaluation form which contained a scoring system along the same lines as the one used by the audience, but also allowed for qualitative feedback and comment.

### **Composers/Librettists**

Given that a strong element of the creation of the production, and indeed Tête à Tête's work as a whole, is a developmental aspect for the creators it is important that Tête à Tête keeps some kind of written record of feedback from the creators. This is useful not only in making the case for Tête à Tête to funders, but also in informing future practice. Furthermore, the format and artistic process of this production is unusual and it would have been interesting to this evaluation to have had more feedback from the creators. However the feedback that was received shows that the experience had value for those concerned with common themes running through which are best summarised by Helen Chadwick and Simon Nicholson.

The strong themes through Helen Chadwick's feedback (composer, *The Feathered Friend*) are opportunity and that it was a learning experience for her.

Most notably she found value in

- the opportunity to collaborate
- the opportunity to write an opera, but on a manageable scale
- the closer than normal involvement with the producing process
- the festival in that it provided an excellent opportunity to try out and workshop ideas in a live setting.

Simon Nicholson (librettist, *Nyanyushka*) seems to have been completely bowled over by the freedom he was offered. As an established writer for TV he is used to working to a very tight brief and his feedback suggests he found the experience liberating. At the same time, he appreciated the support offered to him, particularly by Bill. In his own words he was 'off the leash and yet looked after too'.

He does make the point that he wished he had attended more rehearsals and there is a suggestion that he was reticent to get involved with production once the Director and performers had come together. Given this and his unavailability for rehearsals, he would have liked to have met more with Bill and Tim beforehand to discuss production. This latter point was highlighted by a number of the artists.

### **Performers**

The mean average score for each element is shown as:

<b>Element</b>	<b>Average Score</b>
Music	3.8
Words	3.8
Singing	4.8
Acting	4.6
Playing	4.7
Direction	4.2
Costumes	4.9
Publicity	4
Press	3.2
Administration	4
Production Management	4.3
Rate of pay	3.8

Performance and production elements, particularly the singing, playing, acting and costumes come out with very strong scores. Although it is easy to argue that there may be some bias here, several respondents assert they are not commenting on their own performances, but others in the cast. The correlation between the high scores for these elements with the audience feedback scores should also be noted.

Scores and comments for the music and words are a little more ambivalent. Whilst comments assert that it was exciting to see the outcomes of all of the pairings, there is a feeling that some were more successful than others. Reference is made to the problems experienced in the production of a couple of the operas and there is a strong suggestion that this may have impacted on the final production in the case of *on such a day*. If its final shape had

been clearer earlier it would have been learnt better. Similarly a general point is made about music being delivered in advance to enable the singers to get to grips with their parts in advance of the first rehearsal.

There are several comments on the tour schedule and the closeness of the tour to the workshop performances in the festival. These were all felt to be too close together with the limited time between the festival and performances not allowing enough time for a fresh perspective to be brought to the works and too short for any real development for some of the operas. The tight tour schedule meant that several of the performers felt they were flagging by the end.

The rate of pay, whilst achieving a comparatively low score seems to have been felt to be satisfactory. Chroma's manager was impressed that the rejection of an application to Arts Council England had not had an effect on rates of pay and felt this had been instrumental in retaining the high class players that had been booked.

The element which generated most comment was press and marketing. Scores and comments seem to stem from perceived low audiences for some of the performances and there are several suggestions as to why this may have been so:

- the publicity in general and particularly the images used didn't give strong enough sense of what the show was about
- the link between the title and the content of the operas was not made clear
- length of show and of individual operas should have been made clearer. 6 operas sounds like a long evening and could have been off-putting
- a lot of effort was put into promoting the festival and several respondents wondered if the PR machine had peaked too early.

One of the cast felt more could have been done to use cast members' local knowledge, for example there was a connection with students in Cambridge that could have been exploited. Tête à Tête has an initiative in place that encourages cast members to bring friends and family, but this piece of feedback suggests more could be done in this area. It is certainly encouraging to see that cast members realised getting 'bums on seats' is everybody's responsibility.

## **Venues**

Venues were asked to comment on various aspects of the show and their experience of working with Tête à Tête.

The feedback is broadly very positive. The venues got what they were expecting and all were pleased with it. Particularly strong positive feedback was given in answer to the question 'What do you think hosting *Blind Date* brought to the venue?' Answers include

- cutting edge, high quality work
- original performances which other companies are simply not creating – or taking outside London
- new audiences and a different type of event
- a good fit with the brand values of the venue
- good responses from both audience and staff.

Feedback such as this is important, particularly given one of the stated aims of the tour was to 'cement a very strategic touring circuit in separate regions of the country'. In this regard both RNCM and Cambridge speak of furthering the relationship and building audiences. Feedback from the Riverside shows that staff there feel that both the relationship with Tête à Tête and the audience that is brought in are building. Given one of the aims of the Festival was establishing this relationship, it is good to see that this has been consolidated through *Blind Date*.

There are criticisms that should be noted however. Most of these centre around the branding and marketing of the production

- the change in image away from the child came too late with several venues reporting they had gone to print with their brochures already
- the images were misleading
- the strong points of the production were not brought out. Namely that the operas were short, fun and some big names like Jonzi-D were involved
- 1 venue reported print was late
- 1 venue felt a longer lead time on marketing and earlier discussions on a tactical marketing strategy would have achieved more

All the venues report that Tête à Tête were a pleasure to work with. The Riverside box office noted that confusion over marketing responsibilities between Toby and Nikki that they had reported after the festival had been cleared up and lines of communication were now clear and efficient. The only criticisms in this area were one venue asking for more personal contact and less emails and another reporting that venue staff had felt the get in and out was longer and less efficient than they would have liked.

### **Financial Outturn**

Blind Date cost £123,000. It broke-even using less of a contribution of Friends income than anticipated enabling the remainder of the friends income to go to reserves. The fact this happened with no funding from Arts Council England is testament to the ability of the company to secure funds from other bodies.

Ticket sales and fees made up 11% of income. Fundraised income made up 89% of which all was from private income or trusts and foundations.

73% of expenditure went directly to Artists. All administration costs were absorbed by the organisations core budget.

Blind Date has been financially well managed especially in light of the difficult situations the organisation found itself on hearing that ACE would not be funding the project.

### **Conclusions**

Blind Date was a high quality production that was well received. This is evidenced by

- audience feedback data that shows very high approval ratings across all elements of the production
- artist feedback that shows a similar broad approval
- positive comments on the production and what it brought from all venues concerned

When taken alongside the figures for those new to new opera and the high proportion new to Tête à Tête's work, these combine to show that *Blind Date* met Tête à Tête's general mission and vision were met.

This evaluation would have been stronger on artistic evaluation had there been more to discuss on the artistic elements of the production. The scoring system used for the audience feedback forms does show excellent approval ratings for all the artistic elements. However, some qualitative comment from audience members would have backed up these scores up with more detail, particularly in suggesting reasons why scores were so high.

For the creators, the positive responses should be noted. Particularly in that *Blind Date* created opportunities for them and allowed them to work in a medium where they were given creative freedom and yet still supported. However given the withdrawal of the Matt Rogers work and the development problems associated with Anna Meredith's work, some consideration should be given to the degree of mentoring available to commissioned artists. This is particularly important given Tête à Tête's strong commitment to working with emerging composers and those normally associated with genres other than opera.

The high audience approval ratings, venue feedback and good response for people to join the mailing list suggest that the production has contributed to meeting the aim of cementing a strategic touring circuit:

- whilst audiences were not huge for all venues, those that were there were impressed with the production and there is evidence that they will attend again
- venue managers were pleased with the artistic content of the production and felt Tête à Tête brought something worthwhile and unique to their venues

Evidence from this evaluation suggests that there are audiences to be built on and relationships with venues that can be pursued. Furthermore, the evidence also suggests that once audiences are built, they do attend again regularly.

From the performers' point of view consideration should be given to

- the proximity of workshops to final production performances to allow fresh perspectives to be brought
- the proximity of dates within the tour to allow performers to stay on top form.

The main issue that attracted comment in both artist and venue feedback was marketing for the tour. Tête à Tête is currently coming to beginning of implementing a new marketing strategy. There are several points that come through from both venue and artist feedback that should be noted in context of the strategy:

- ensure strong selling points of productions are clearly communicated by branding, print information and images used with consistency and well in advance.
- given the low percentage of audience respondents attracted by newspapers, assess the PR campaign for impact on copy/presence in listings
- given the audience numbers in London assess whether audiences are split over R&D and final presentations
- ensure local connections of all involved in productions are fully exploited, especially for venues outside London.

Given the lower than expected proportion of audience respondents attracted by venue marketing, this suggests there is more to be done in getting the venues to work harder in attracting their audience in. In working with venues

- assess use of going to venues who are not totally committed to building audiences for this type of work
- ensure print delivery is timely
- avoid last minute image changes or changes to branding
- build strong partnerships and relationships where early discussions on tactical marketing strategies can bear full fruit.

## Ben Lane February 2007

### Foot note: Improving Evaluation Data

Whilst audience feedback rates of around 10% are consistent with previous evaluations and do give a sample size that allows meaningful conclusions to be drawn from the data, a higher response rate would add more weight.

Some suggestions for encouraging a higher completion rate:

- a more attractive evaluation form that is more in keeping with the vibrancy and sense of fun of Tête à Tête's other print
- completed forms are entered into a prize draw with the winners receiving free tickets for the next show and the chance to meet the cast.
- Someone needs to be dedicated to coercing people to fill in the forms FOH post show out of London.

It is essential that the evaluation form continues to collect the data it does – feedback on artistic elements, service elements, demographic and, very importantly, mailing list details. In addition some method to collect comment and qualitative feedback is desirable. Given that this was a finished production, the series of questions asked on the Festival evaluation form (when work was in development) may have been overkill here. However, the incorporation of a simple comments box into the evaluation form would have given the necessary scope. It would be worthwhile examining the design of the evaluation form, both to bring it in line with the quality of the rest of Tête à Tête's print and also to incorporate space for qualitative feedback.