

tête à tête

THE CUMNOR AFFAIR EVALUATION
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1. Main report: Introduction and Aims of Tête à Tête

The Cumnor Affair was Tête à Tête's 10th anniversary production. The work was a new commission from composer Philip Cashian and journalist and bestselling author, Iain Pears. This was the first time both artists had collaborated and furthermore, even though they are established names in their respective fields, it was also the first time either had created an opera.

The gestation of the opera shows how Tête à Tête's approach can offer pathways for new opera from initial idea through to full professional production. From an initial introduction at Tête à Tête's Speed dating event in 2007, (an event designed to matchmake those involved in creating and staging new opera), a 'proof of concept' for *The Cumnor Affair* was staged at the 2007 Opera Festival. This provided the impetus for both artists to work with Tête à Tête in developing the full production.

Tête à Tête's aims in staging the production all fit within the mission and vision statements – to “bring uplifting, surprising, daring and intimate opera productions of the highest quality to the widest possible public” and “to be known as the company that shows how challenging opera can be a great night out for anyone”.

Specific aims for this production were

- a. to empower artists to produce new work, new creative ideas and take creative risks
- b. to produce quality, accessible and affordable new opera
- c. to move, inspire and delight people

It is easy to see how the development of this work fits with the first aim. However, it is beyond the scope of this evaluation to examine the success of this relationship and process further. This evaluation is concerned mainly with feedback forms from audience members. The data these provide show the degree to which b. and c. are being met and the outcomes of a. to be commented on.

2. Outcomes

2.1 List of shows and ticket sales

The work was performed on 5 nights between 10-16 November 2008 at Tête à Tête's home base, The Riverside Studios, Hammersmith. The studio used for the performances had a capacity of 151.

Attendance on each night were as follows:

DATE	AUDIENCE	WITH VOLLIES/RIVERSIDE VIPS
Monday 10/11	128	136
Wednesday 12/11	148	151
Friday 14/11	131	139
Saturday 15/11	114	126
Sunday 16/11	151	151

In total 703 people saw the production – an average of 140 tickets a night or 93% of capacity.

The target for attendance was 650.

3.3 Financial outturn

The production broke even. The direct costs for the production were £90,892. These were met by 68% Trusts and Foundations, 18% Personal Donations, 7.5% earned income, and 6.5% Company Surplus.

4. Audience Feedback Evaluation

4.1 Methodology

Feedback was via an audience questionnaire that was distributed to audience members as they left the show. Tête à Tête staff were on hand from 'the feedback bedchamber' to encourage people to complete forms.

The form collects both quantitative and qualitative feedback from the audience as well as some demographics data. The form used was an adapted version of the 2008 festival form and this allows comparison with some of the festival evaluation data.

In total 150 forms have been completed, giving a return rate of 22% of paying audience. This is a dramatic improvement on previous return rates which have usually been around 10%. There is nothing in the forms that suggests why a higher rate was achieved this time, but it would be worth Tête à Tête staff reflecting on whether they did anything differently so this can be replicated in the future.

4.2 Results for Festival content

4.2.1 Scoring ratings for quality of experience

The following numbers ratings were used:

1="not my cup of tea"; 2 = "not bad, but could have been better"; 3 = "mostly good"; 4 = "bloomin' marvellous".

These are designed to be a humorous take on the usual rating definitions. It is intended that 1 and 2 are used to express a negative opinion, whilst 3 and 4 are positive.

When asked to rate the overall quality of their experience, results break down as follows

Overall Rating	
4	55%
3	40%
2	3%
1	2%

Total Responses 134

Overall, 95% of respondents expressed a positive opinion. This very high level of approval is given further weight by the fact that over half the respondents gave overall quality the maximum score.

This figure is higher than that for the 2008 festival evaluation (88%) and potentially reflects the fact that this was a finished and polished production, as opposed to the in-progress nature of many of those shown in the festival.

Individual element ratings:

Rating	Music	Words	Singing	Musicians' Playing	Acting	Production (costumes, set etc.)
4	30%	39%	64%	56%	72%	56%
3	45%	47%	29%	42%	25%	37%
2	16%	13%	6%	3%	3%	6%
1	8%	1%	1%	0%	0%	1%
Total responses	141	144	144	144	145	145

Ratings for individual elements of the production also show a similar high level of approval.

As has been the case with previous festival evaluations, performance aspects (singing, playing and acting) score highest. Production, achieving the lowest ratings in both festival evaluations, has scored very well this time. This again reflects the fact that this was a polished and finished production.

The lowest ratings here are for music and words, although both still show strong approval ratings with 75% and 86% of respondents respectively giving a positive rating. The reason why these have done less well than other elements is suggested in both the 'Putting Words in Your Mouth' (see 4.2.4) and qualitative (see 4.2.5) sections of the feedback forms. Evidence here points strongly to these aspects of the show being those that people found most challenging.

For those who had given scores of 1 or 2 for the music or words, it should be noted that the great majority still rated their evening's experience positively as shown by the 95% approval rating for overall quality. For all but a very few then, Tête à Tête has met its vision statement of showing that "challenging opera can be a great night out for anyone"

4.2.2 Would they attend again and would they recommend Tête à Tête to anyone else?

	Attend again?	Recommend?
Yes	97%	99%
No	3%	1%
Total responses	144	141

As with the 2008 festival, a very strong positive answer is given to both questions. In terms of numbers of people answering no, this is only 4 people and 2 people respectively.

The feedback forms also show that 40% of respondents gave their address for the mailing list. A further 20% indicated that they were already on it. Whilst these are good figures, it does show that intent to attend again did not necessarily translate into closer engagement with Tête à Tête.

4.2.3 Did the experience change their opinion of what new opera could be?

Changed opinion of new opera?	
Yes, for the better	44%
Yes, for the worse	2%
No, I already thought it was like this	50%

Don't know	4%
Total responses	146

Questions so far have established that respondents were strongly positive about the quality of their experience. This question was asked to see whether the experience had changed their perceptions of the art form.

The figures for those replying 'Yes, for the worse' or 'don't know' are broadly similar to those in the 2008 evaluation. The 2% whose opinion was changed for the worse represents only 3 respondents.

The main difference in these figures from the 2008 festival figures is in those whose opinion changed for the better or was unchanged. In the festival more had had their opinion changed with 52% saying 'yes, for the better' and 38% saying it had stayed the same. This switch, along with the figures for people's previous experience with new opera (section 4.3.1) suggests that this was a more experienced audience than that which attended in the festival.

4.2.4 Choose from a list of given words to describe the experience

Respondents were given a list of 19 words and asked to choose three which best described their experience. This question was intended to shed more light on the answers given to the questions above and to collect some form of qualitative feedback, without people feeling they had to write comments. There is a balance of positive and negative words and phrases, with many of them in antonym pairs.

Words	number	%age
Intelligent	66	14.7%
Original	65	14.4%
Gripping	52	11.6%
Quality	52	11.6%
Challenging	48	10.7%
Polished	40	8.9%
Loved it	37	8.2%
Passionate	30	6.7%
Sharp	24	5.3%
A great night out	13	2.9%
Funny	6	1.3%
Dull	4	0.9%
Not my cup of tea	4	0.9%
Unengaging	3	0.7%
Scary	2	0.4%
Should have stayed on the sofa	2	0.4%
Commonplace	1	0.2%
Confusing	1	0.2%
Second-rate	0	0.0%

From this list it is possible to say that the most popular description of the production was that it was 'intelligent, original, gripping and quality'. Given the subject matter and nature of the production it is good to see gripping as one of the most frequently selected words.

In general, the order of words on this list further backs up the quality issue. As with the 2008 festival evaluation, positive words occupy the top half of the table and negative words the bottom.

Also similar to the 2008 festival evaluation is the presence of the word 'challenging' so far up the list. As discussed in the 2008 festival evaluation document, it has not necessarily been used in a negative sense and is often selected alongside unambiguously positive words.

The slightly lower scores for quality of music and words and some of the qualitative feedback comments below suggest that the challenging element of the production was these elements. This is also not a bad thing. Given the strong rating for overall quality, this shows Tête à Tête is meeting its vision statement of showing that "challenging opera can be a great night out for anyone".

4.2.5 Qualitative Feedback

Respondents were given space to add any comments. Some suggestions for content had been given as

- commenting on any of the answers they had given on the rest of the form
- commenting on non artistic aspects of their experience – ticket price, venue, marketing etc
- whether they thought Tête à Tête's mission statement was being met
- to provide a strap line for Tête à Tête by completing the statement "Tête à Tête: ..."

Just under 1/3rd of respondents had left some kind of written feedback about their experience, a good amount of which is on the artistic content of the production. This is encouraging as it shows people were engaged and inspired by the production.

From their replies, some common themes emerge:

The overall quality of the production and experience is noted by many:

- "The music, performance and overall production were of a very high quality"
- "The quality of the performance, both the singing and chamber ensemble playing was outstanding. Real beauty, particularly Dudley and the 3 string players – Terrific"
- "Really exciting and unusual with high quality musical performances".

The set and production in particular attract praise:

- "Very well positioned, lighting great, effect of Queen and mesh - top notch"
- "I thought the presentation splendid. The lighting, costumes and performances excellent"
- "My best bit was the set, lighting etc. Brilliant!"

As has already been indicated, comments show that it was the music and to a lesser extent, the drama, that people found most challenging:

- "Bit too many discords for my taste"
- "The music wasn't my cup of tea"
- "I need a better lesson or introduction to the style of music."

One common theme in comments on the music was the style of vocal writing:

- "I would have liked more actual singing. The duet bits were good. More songy singing as well as talky singing"

- “The music was super but the songs not so. Too much sung conversation. Long live the aria!”
- “I enjoyed the contemporary music but would have liked possibly more variety in it.”

In terms of the drama and plot, the ‘reveal’ of Amy’s murderer is cause for a few comments

- Sorry that more wasn't made of the fall.
- Plot flawed. Amy was pushed taking out any further ambiguity and this then conflicted with what followed.
- I was expecting a mystery, I didn't get one. Do this in the Tudor gallery of the NPG or the kitchens at Hampton Court

In terms of non-artistic elements commented on, ticket prices are one theme:

- Ticket price was great - would probably have paid more.
- Ticket prices very reasonable, cafe very good
- Ticket prices - fair. A good price.

And seats are another:

- Beautiful production, very hard seats
- Venue - seats too hard and cold. Good size for this intimate piece
- Seats very uncomfortable
- So much fun! Great juxtaposition of plot, funny characters, music, period. Terrible chairs, but oh well.

It is good to see the ticket price attracting attention and fits with one of the aims of the production in producing “affordable new opera”. It is interesting that the seats are the most reoccurring cause for criticism and shows that an audience’s environment is an important part of their experience.

4.3 Results for Demographics

4.3.1 Previous experience with opera and new opera

Respondents were asked to indicate when they had last seen an opera and a new opera.

Have seen in...	Seen opera	Seen new opera
last 6 months	70%	44%
last year	14%	24%
last 5 years	12%	15%
never	4%	17%
Total responses	141	105

Tête à Tête had set themselves targets of

- those new to opera - 6%
- those new to new opera - 25%

Neither target was met. These figures may initially appear disappointing, particularly given that Tête à Tête has seen both of these categories increasing in the past two years.

There are several potential reasons why these figures are lower than targeted :

- that the subject matter and marketing materials attracted a more experienced audience
- full Tête à Tête productions attract a more experienced audience
- people who had attended for the first time in the festival have returned.

- the larger proportion of the audience completing feedback forms gives a truer picture of the Tête à Tête audience.

The feedback form gives no way of testing any of these, although the data for respondents ages (section 4.3.2) does suggest an older and therefore potentially more experienced.

The most interesting outcome for Tête à Tête would be that people who have attended for the first time previously have returned. Currently the feedback form does not collect this data. Finding out when and if they had last attended a Tête à Tête production and the number of times they had attended would be a simple way of attempting to do this.

4.3.2 Age range

Age Range	
	%age
Under 16	1%
17-22	4%
23-28	7%
29-45	28%
46-55	19%
56-65	29%
66+	11%
Total Responses	141

As already noted in the previous section, more respondents were in the older brackets than had been the case for the festival. It is the 23-28 bracket that has decreased most markedly (18% in the 2008 festival) and the 46-55 and 56-65 brackets that have seen the increases (12% and 20% respectively in the 2008 festival).

The target for under 30 was lower than work within the previous 2 years due to the subject matter and marketing drive. A target of 9% was set. It is inconclusive as to whether this was met due to the streaming of the form, however it is evident it was very close.

4.3.3 What other art forms/entertainment do they partake in?

Other Art Forms	
	%age
theatre	16%
cinema	16%
art galleries	15%
museums	13%
Opera	13%
concerts/gigs	12%
music theatre	8%
ballet	6%
clubs/cabaret	1%

As with the 2008 festival data, these show respondents as very culturally active with respondents indicating they regularly attend 4.4 other artforms/types of entertainment.

4.3.4 What did respondents do during the day?

This was intended to throw further light on what kind of people were attending. The question was not particularly successful in that it only attracted 50 serious responses.

Apart from those who were retired, the majority of respondents were professionals and a good number of those worked in the creative industries.

Questions such as this and the previous one aim to build a picture of the audience in the same way that the Arts Council England's audience segmentation work does. It would be worth Tête à Tête looking at this research to identify the segments within its own audience.

4.3.5 Where had they heard about the festival?

Respondents were asked to indicate how they had been made aware of the festival.

How heard?	
	%age
somebody else booked	23%
word of mouth	23%
Riverside Brochure/website	19%
Tat email list	10%
Tête à Tête physical mailing list	9%
read about it in newspapers	9%
Tete a Tete Website	3%
email forwarded	3%
picked up a leaflet	3%
Total responses	141

These are similar to recent evaluations results. As usual, word of mouth plays an important part with the majority of these indicating it was a cast member or Tête à Tête staff that told them about the production.

The 19% brought in through the venue's publicity and website is encouraging. This figure has increased from 12% in the 2008 festival and suggests that the partnership with The Riverside is effective in bringing in an audience outside of Tête à Tête's core audience.

The largest proportion though is through Tête à Tête's own marketing with the mailing list being the most successful at 19% if the email list and physical list are added together. Leaflets appear the least successful method.

5. Artists feedback

Artists involved had been asked questions on their experience performing with Tête à Tête. These show a very high level of satisfaction with several expressing what a pleasure it was to work with the company.

Some themes and comments of note emerge:

- many would have liked the score earlier (although as one of them points out, this is frequently a problem with new music)
- several suggest that vocal workshops with the vocalists and composer/librettist would have been helpful. This would have improved the vocal writing
- the rate of pay has attracted a few comments with one person asking for parity with ENO rates
- the idea of sending all performers a publicity email / flyers to forward meets with approval (and its success can be seen by the number of people who cite a cast member as 'word of mouth' in 4.3.5) showing the success of the Member get Member marketing strategy.

6. Venue staff feedback

Only two departments (Marketing and box Office) have given feedback and there is little to report here. This suggests after two years of working together there are no concerns.

7. Conclusion

The Cumnor Affair was a high quality production that was well received and met its production aims. 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 the venue
- positive reviews in the Press Book

Attendance was high with a low % new to new opera, therefore Tête à Tête is servicing existing audiences very well via The Cumnor Affair, and sat along side a portfolio including The Festival it illustrates that Tête à Tête's general mission and vision were met, via The Cumnor Affair.

8. Recommendations:

1. The form now needs to include tracking repeat visits and history of Tête à Tête's attendance at Riverside Studios clearly.
2. The age streams needs to be in line with target stream to monitor with efficiency.
3. Tête à Tête's needs to address why the return rate was so high to use these methods in the future.
4. The forms quality scoring needs to include something between "Mostly Good" and "Bloomin' Marvellous".
5. The forms should enable people to put on more than one persons details for mailing data. eg. Give a friends/your guests details. Explain you don't get the booking data.