

Edinburgh Festival

Various venues, August 2009

Reviewed by **Malcolm Rock**

A double bill by local radical Michael Clark felt sadly dated, but soaring puppets and Butoh sheep brought bloom to the timeless tales and early music favourites that made up this year's Edinburgh International Festival.

Scottish choreographer Clark gathered the last flecks of glitter from the glam and punk period for his programme at the Playhouse.

Swamp and *Come, Been and Gone* were powdered with the songs of David Bowie, Iggy Pop and Bruce Gilbert of art-punk outfit Wire.

An audience filing into the auditorium could have been fooled into thinking it had stepped into a rock concert – the house was shaking from Velvet Underground pulsing through its speakers – but when the curtain rose there was little in the way of restive dance. Indeed proceedings were decidedly leaden.

Clark has a distinctive sense of the body as sculpture. His dancers often resemble crystal ornaments and designer faience. A woman in a black, cream and mocha jumpsuit adopts an impossibly upright posture with arms fixed at her sides. She stalks the stage, twists then drops, as if she is a piece of abstract glassware searching for the perfect place on a mantelpiece.

The robust company of dancers comprises a variety of ages and physical shapes. Its members share the same hairstyle and perfunctory gestures. There is no real urgency to what is being danced, and the fact that most of the songs were recorded during the 70s and early 80s means that there is an antique grain attached to the sound that erodes the delineation of the shapes created by the dancers.

The Royal Ballet of Flanders, on the other hand, has a cusped elegance unmatched on the classical stage.

Flanders is a company that wears its pride on its sleeve without appearing vainglorious. Its stripped back *Return of Ulysses* is waiting danced, and Eva Dewaele depicts a most patient Penelope in a kingdom of repetitive ritual.

While Penelope awaits the return of her seafaring husband the action skips backwards and forwards in time. One moment Ulysses is slaughtering his rival suitors; the next those same suitors are taking turns to waltz with the standoffish queen.

Choreographer Christian Spuck busies Penelope with hard sweeps and broad extensions danced to a soundtrack that alternates between Purcell (performed live by the Scottish Chamber Orchestra) and Doris Day, Bobby Vinton and Charles Trenet.

St Kilda Island of the Birdmen at the Festival Theatre is three performances on one stage.

Gaelic songstress Alyth McCormack leads an opera composed by David P Graham and Jean-Paul Dessy. Meanwhile a docu-drama directed by Iain Finlay Macleod and Thierry Poquet is projected onto two suspended screens that are regularly intruded upon by a third aerial show choreographed by Juha-Pekka Marsalo.

The number of directors and creative advisers listed in the programme are testament to a cross-media broth that has too many cooks. Although each individual medium is thoroughly considered it is impossible to find a common thread amongst them other than an implied sense of isolation and danger experienced by those who once inhabited the Hebridean island furthest from the Scottish coast.

It is Graham and Dessy's menacing, percussive score that saves this *St Kilda* from general evacuation. McCormack's ethereal vocal performance is also a highlight.

The Göttingen International Handel Festival production of *Admeto re di Tessaglia* adopts the stately world of

samurai and geisha to tell the Greek myth of the queen who sacrifices her life to save that of her husband.

Director Dorris Dörrie's Japanese confectionary is populated by slow moving Butoh dancers and Hercules in a sumo suit. Its comedy, therefore, derives from superfluous visual gags rather than anything inherent in the Handel score, but there is some charm in dressing the austere disciples of Butoh in wool and having them nuzzle against the soprano on all fours.

Scene changes are unusually long and result in little alteration to the *mise en scene*. Thankfully conductor Nicholas McGegan – who leads a faultless FestspielOrchester – is happy to entertain the audience during these protracted intervals with knowing winks, rolls of his eyes and confounded shrugs of his shoulders.

Staatsoper Stuttgart offers a similarly divorced but noble production of *Actus Tragicus* at the Festival Theatre.

Bach's oratorio is of course best performed in a church, but Herbert Wernicke's proscenium staging that moves the opera into a block of flats built above the tomb of Christ is impossible to dislike.

More than 40 tenants, including standout soloists Simone Schneider and Shigeo Ishino, sing a god-fearing libretto while going about their day-to-day tasks such as eating dinner, decorating a Christmas tree, and preparing a noose for suicide.

Due to the dividing walls of rooms, members of the chorus cannot always see or hear one another. Their vocal disunity, however, can be forgiven in light of Wernicke's engaging experiment of staging.

There were few if any children at the premiere of Mabou Mines' puppetry *Peter and Wendy* at the Royal Lyceum.

Taking the book as her source rather than the play, Liza Lorwin's adaptation is crammed with those disturbing details that made JM

Barrie's novel as unforgettable for adults as it was for their offspring at bedtime.

Eight puppeteers populate the stage, operating flying Bunraku versions of Peter, Hook and Smee while constructing Never Never Land out of bed linen and stacks of books.

Karen Kandel is dazzling as the narrator who provides a voice for every character as well as a body for Wendy herself. This is her show and everyone else's enchantment.

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