

Tête à Tête: The Opera Festival 2015

Tête à Tête at The Place, London, July 22, and Kings Place, London, August 6

The publicity for Tête à Tête's annual opera extravaganza boasts that it is 'The world's largest festival of new opera' with 'more than 100 performances of over 40 new works'. Impressive, certainly, but the sceptic will ask, 'Is there a demand for that many new operas? Will any of those "over 40 new works" ever be performed again?'

Legitimate questions, but we shall never know unless someone gives it a try. Under the artistic direction of Bill Bankes-Jones, Tête à Tête has existed since 1998, when it was a relatively small affair. In 2007 it became 'Tête à Tête: The Opera Festival', and the ethos remains the same—present as many new or nearly new works as possible, by established names or by composers who have never tried opera before. Some are works in progress, some emerge fully formed, and not everything corresponds to agreed definitions of what opera is. No matter: if it works, it works; if it doesn't, simply move on.

I attended this year's festival on two evenings. At The Place (usually reserved for dance), the first work I saw was by the Nigerian-born Helen Parker-Jayne Isibor, who performs and composes under the alluring name The Venus Bushfires. She provided her own text (in Nigerian pidgin English) for *Song Queen: a Pidgin Opera*. To perform it, she opted for a classically trained three-piece chorus (tenor, mezzo, soprano), a string quartet (the Alauda Quartet), electric guitar, African kora and percussion. She herself sang and played the hang, a percussion instrument resembling an upturned wok.

It proved an effective ensemble, and Isibor's writing for it blended African, European and jazz idioms in a pleasingly hypnotic melange. Her voice had a sweet, relaxed tone that easily held the attention. I found it difficult to penetrate the pidgin texts, and no surtitles were provided—that isn't a complaint—but as far as I could make out, there was no particular dramatic element. Instead the texts praised 'freedom', promised that 'we gon' defeat the enemy' and 'peace gon' reign for evermore'.

Worthy sentiments, of course, but the performance felt more like a concert: a dozen or so songs, each apparently complete in itself, each warmly applauded. A projected backdrop consisted of brightly coloured animations that could have worked equally well at a rock concert. As if to compensate for a lack of action, the dancer and choreographer Francis Angol intermittently gambolled across the stage, but the effect was distracting. *Song Queen* was agreeable enough on its own terms, nearer *ballet chanté* than opera, perhaps, but rather short on theatricality.

Shirley J. Thompson's *Sacred Mountain: Incidents in the Life of Queen Nanny of the Maroons* certainly had a story to tell. Queen Nanny is a historical figure who, in the 18th century, led a slave revolt against the British in Jamaica: an operatic heroine for today, then. Thompson's music included a pre-recorded track, more a synthesized 'wash' than a detailed orchestral score, and two live musicians: the trumpeter Mark Kavuma and the multi-instrumentalist Orphy Robinson, here playing percussion. Thompson herself conducted. Abigail Kelly took the part of Queen Nanny, singing with forthright



■ *Tête à Tête*: (l.) Helen Parker-Jayne Isibor in her 'Song Queen'; (r.) Abigail Kelly as Queen Nanny in Shirley J. Thompson's 'Sacred Mountain'

conviction and powerful stage presence. Thompson also provided a role for an Orator, an enigmatic figure wandering around the auditorium, intermittently delivering a commentary. Given that the part was taken by Cleveland Watkiss, one of Britain's leading jazz singers, it seemed a shame that his declarations were spoken, not sung.

Once again, dance played a part, but the director Dane Hurst provided choreography that integrated the four dancers into the storytelling, rather than pasting them in to cover a narrative gap. Even so, and despite Kelly's powerful presence, the synthesizer soundtrack lacked features, while the two live players—both proficient jazzers—played as if reluctant to impose themselves. Perhaps *Sacred Mountain* was a work still in development.

Song Queen and *Sacred Mountain* were by black composers and drew a sizeable black audience; the audience for Tim Benjamin's *Life Stories* was smaller and mostly white. *Life Stories* was in fact two monodramas, not exactly linked but both showing outsiders struggling against the odds. In the first, 'Rest in Peace' (derived from a Chekhov story), the bass James Fisher played a homeless old man in Moscow in 2024, although place and time could have been any city, today. 'Silent Jack', meanwhile, featured the mezzo-soprano Taylor Wilson as a female highway robber in the 18th century. Both singers delivered Benjamin's own texts with exemplary clarity and feeling; the composer himself not only directed but also conducted the five onstage players of Radius, whose music had something of the sardonic wit and patchwork pastiche of a silent cinema pit band. Both pieces told their stories skilfully.

Between the main works, *Tête à Tête* also offered 'pop-up operas' in sundry non-stage spaces. It being a fine evening, these unfolded on the pavement outside The Place. The only one I saw was Orlando Gough's *My Mother My Daughter*, which, in ten minutes, featured two births, one death and a lifetime of everyday conflict between the title characters. The jokes came thick and fast, as did the costume changes. Amy Freston (Mother) and Hannah Mason (Daughter) revelled in the mix of slapstick and raw emotion, while the band—two cellists—managed to keep a straight face. The skeletal but inventive production was by Bill Bankes-Jones with Oliver Platt.