

## Theatre 2020

### January 2020: WOZZECK

It was good to see so many of the Opera Study Group attending my introduction to Alban Berg's *Wozzeck*, one of the most challenging operas in the repertoire. We watched almost the whole of the opera on a DVD of a realistic production from the Vienna State Opera dating from 1987. Half a dozen of us then attended the screening at Broadway a few days later of William Kentridge's production from the New York Metropolitan Opera. This production, which was a big hit at the 2017 Salzburg Festival and also at the Met, could not have been more different. Kentridge chose to set *Wozzeck* during the first world war, roughly the period when the opera was composed (1914-1922).

The action takes place on a single chaotic set built of platforms connected by rickety walkways, evoking a bombed-out city. Silent actors, most in gas masks, keep appearing here and there.

An almost continuous stream of animation, drawings and projections, mostly in black and white, appear on and behind the set: images of blown-up buildings; military maps; charcoal drawings of bedraggled people and stick figures; war-ravaged countryside.

This all added to the nightmarish atmosphere but did little to help with understanding what was supposed to be happening on stage. For example, in the first scene, rather than shaving the Captain, as indicated in the libretto, *Wozzeck* is seen here operating a small movie camera that projects animated sketches of people onto a small screen.

One of the more controversial aspects of the production is the depiction of *Wozzeck's* and Marie's young son as a puppet, wearing ragged clothes and a gas mask, rather than as a boy, which rather robbed the final scene of its impact.

Despite these negative comments on the production, it was a powerful and almost overwhelming experience, thanks to an impressive cast led by the baritone Peter Mattei in the title role and the soprano Elza van den Heever as Marie, *Wozzeck's* common-law wife, as well as the conducting of Yannick Nézet-Séguin, who drew playing that was both powerful and delicate from the terrific Met orchestra.

Colin Jones

### January 2020: PORGY AND BESS

Almost 40 of us went to the Broadway Cinema to see *Porgy and Bess* by the great George Gershwin with his fabulous music, and songs which feature, *Summertime*, *It ain't necessarily so*, and *I got plenty of nothin'*. There was murder, greed, abuse, and drug addicts which was very dark, but also lots of lovely songs and music and dancing intermingled with humour. The main characters *Porgy* (Eric Owen) and *Bess* (Angel Blue) were wonderful. I enjoyed it very much and the other U3As said they enjoyed it too.

Jean

### January 2020: NELL GWYNN

Jessica Swale's Restoration Drama was on at the Lace Market the same week as we exited the EU. More than once during the performance I found myself thinking how little has changed. King Charles, a Boris Johnson type figure, blusters and poses to his courtiers and lady friends. Maybe he should have solved his political and religious dilemmas with a referendum. We know how well that works! *Nell* is an up to date female who know what she wants and how to get it. She is smart, pretty and saucy. The "Mechanicals" entertained and amused, the Spaniel was cute and the costumes, set and singing were impressive.

Marianne White

### **March 2020: AGRIPPINA by Georg Frederick Handel**

To give an outline of the complex plot of this opera, let alone a flavour of the music and acting in the allocated 300 words would be nigh on impossible. Suffice to say, even the most sceptical member of the audience could not fail to be won over by the combination of beautiful singing, dramatic acting and a black comedy plot which is as relevant today as it was when written in 1709 or in Imperial Rome.

The opera satirizes ambitious politicians with Emperor Claudius the great buffoon, sung by bass Matthew Rose bearing a striking resemblance to a number of modern heads of state. A comedy of hypocrisy, greed and sexual manipulation sums up this opera,

The empress Agrippina, brilliantly sung and acted by the Mezzo soprano Joyce di Donato plots to install her son Nero on the throne in place of her husband Claudius.

Nero provides the first shock for anyone new to the world of Baroque opera; he is sung by the mezzo soprano Kate Lindsay. Originally the part would have been sung by a castrato!.

Agrippina's plot is thrown into disarray when she learns that Claudius intends to name his army commander Ottone, sung by counter tenor Iestyn Davies, as his successor.

To counter this, Agrippina exploits a love triangle involving Poppea, beautifully sung and acted by soprano Brenda Rae, Ottone and Claudius. The Director David McVicar turns this into an hilarious soft porn romp.

For the historical record, Agrippina poisons Claudius to get Nero on the throne but the ungrateful son then murders his mother.

David Dobbs

### **March 2020: MOONLIGHT & MAGNOLIAS**

The Playhouse struck gold with this production. It was vibrant, innovative and current. The four protagonists brought to life a play of two halves. Part 1 was an hilarious script, riddled with action, one-liners and pithy comments on the society of the time. I haven't been to a stage play so full of belly laughs in a long time – a very sophisticated slapstick, performed with exquisite characterisation and immaculate timing. The audience laughed aloud throughout the first half.

This does not, however, downplay the very serious messages of racial inequality prevalent in the southern states of America, paralleled by the very obvious second-class status held by the influential and affluent Jewish entrepreneurs of Hollywood's movie-making community. Whilst the humour spilled over into the second part these very serious views were faced into boldly as they argued and debated the sense of trying to turn this book into a block-buster film: "You'll never get a movie out of it!"

Who would have thought that so much could be packed into a story line that had three men locked in a room for five days intent on writing a script for *Gone With the Wind* .. and the scriptwriter had never read the book!

The remarkable and versatile performance of Joe Alessi as the producer kept the audience on the edge of their seats. The script writer and producer (Dan Fredenburgh and Oscar Pearce) were a perfect foil, grudgingly sucked into his vision to create one good film. But the gradual decline of the efficient secretary, Hayley Doherty, was a sterling performance – her few short entrances as she became more frazzled and dishevelled brought substance of time and the reality of life beyond the locked door.

Well, they did get a movie out of it and they most certainly got a spectacular play out of the mammoth task it became. The silver screen was described in a giveaway line as the only time machine ever built. Take me back in that time machine now and I would happily watch the performance again.