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ANON: AN OPERA BY ERROLLYN WALLEN

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Wickham Theatre, Bristol, Monday 17 March 2014 / Gloucester Guildhall, Tuesday 18 March 2014

Sopranos: Joanna Foote, Sara Lian Owen, Claire Wild / Actors: Ronke Adekoluejo, Shin-Fei Chen

MD/Keyboards: Stuart Wild / Cello: Joseph Spooner /Percussion: James Gambold

Director: Wils Wilson / Welsh National Opera

Audience reactions to dark themes

I was able to see Anon in performance twice during its short tour (also covering Cardiff, Wolverhampton and Birmingham), and would happily have seen all nine performances. Having watched its development it was a joy for me to see it at last fully staged, shining out in the night, and the light and the half-light of Anna Barrett's lighting: a work of total commitment like all other aspects of this stunning new opera.

Anon opens with the two actors on stage, playing young girls talking, and introducing clearly what the piece is about. One of them is reading Abbé Prévost's novel Manon Lescaut. She says that the heroine has no power but surely things are different now. Not so, says her friend, exasperated by her naiveté:

Every day there is a Manon story, a story where the girl doesn't speak. Every day a girl goes missing, every day a girl gets raped... It's a story happening the world over. We just don't see it.

She points into the auditorium, and from its darkness emerge the three singers. It is a strong opening. Interestingly it is not one of those three sopranos but the cello which is the first voice to sing. Errollyn Wallen uses this instrument in different ways through the opera, sometimes as a bass line, at other times adding layers of colour and drama. The sopranos add their voices with the line which will come back later and again at the end of the drama, challenging the listener to think about the uses and abuses of power –

What would you do?

Errollyn Wallen takes the story line from Manon Lescaut of the boy and girl who run away together, incurring parental displeasure, but she departs from the linear story, stitching in different themes and characters with immense skill both in terms of the music and the text. A variant of the lyrical music for

Run away with me... through the stones and the waves of the streets

comes back for a scene in which all the anonymous girls write to a friend in their home country. Here, speaking and singing lines are beautifully inter-woven. In between the percussion kicks in for the powerful scene in which we see The Mothers advancing threateningly. They sing of protecting their daughters, but there is venom in their voices. We see that they too are victims of cultural forces that keep women in submission. And interspersed are cries of anguish from anonymous girls –

'I am drowning'; 'I was only seven'; 'Why did you let them mutilate me?'

Director Wils Wilson has facilitated the flow of the drama equally skilfully, while Amanda Stoodley's design is an essential and integral part of the whole, always enhancing the action. There are times when performers are literally hidden, even imprisoned, within the pieces of furniture which make up the 'walls' of the set, discovered only when flashlights shine upon them. Neither composer nor director shy away from the harrowing truths the opera portrays, going as far as murder. Errollyn Wallen's insistent, driving rhythms lead us inexorably to the awful conclusion of the fact that girls, in some cultures, are seen to bring shame upon their families by having relationships with boys from other backgrounds, which is death for dishonour –

As head of the family, I know what I have to do, to remove the stain.

This is the dramatic centre of the piece, I feel, very movingly portrayed with a magnificent cry from the cello, though without flinching from the ugliness of the act. Errollyn Wallen makes it impossible for us to avoid seeing that this is not something from the past, from the other side of the world; it is something happening in England, in Wales, in Britain, now. In the Q&A session following the Bristol performance I saw, there was some discussion about what could be seen as difficult subject matter. Soprano Joanna Foote said that, at first, she had wondered whether the events portrayed were unrealistically extreme, but had come to realise not only that these things happen, but that they are close to us all. Indeed, as I write there is a report on the BBC News about girls in gangs in London leading 'desperate lives' in which 'rape is used as a weapon and carrying drugs and guns is seen as normal.'

Afterwards I spoke to a young woman who had been in the audience. She said that Anon had really conveyed to her the dark spiral which could easily lead vulnerable girls wanting to be rich and famous, to be footballers' wives – as the schoolgirls sing to the telling accompaniment of a toy piano in the final scene of the opera – down into prostitution, crack addiction and, at worst, murder. She reiterated a comment made by people in the Q&A about there being an important message in this opera for young men.

The show is impeccably sung, spoken and played by a tight cast. I cannot single out any one performer for higher praise than any other. The balance of voices and instruments is exemplary throughout. The transitions between characters of different ages and genders are smoothly and convincingly done. I asked a number of audience members if they had understood these transitions and all said they had found them perfectly clear. Several people – and this included people not used to going to opera – used the word 'accessible' about the show. Another word on many people's lips was 'powerful'. Reactions which I heard to the music were also generally positive – 'attractive'; 'the music carried it all the time'; 'musically wonderful.'

In Gloucester there was, very sadly, only a small audience, but in it I encountered people brimming over with enthusiasm about Anon. These were not young people, but they were people new to opera who had come along on the strength of picking up the flier in the theatre and being intrigued by this story of 'the secret journey of millions of women'. A group of three women said it was 'mesmerising', that they were 'blown away' and 'didn't want it to end.' And they, as mothers themselves, saw very clearly the reality in the situations portrayed. A couple I talked to in the bar were similarly full of praise – 'There's such a lot in there, and the stories apply to men as well as to women.'

Familiar as I have become with elements of the music and the text during the development period, it was only when I saw Anon performed for the second time that I really got to grips with it in its entirety. There is nothing wrong in this – why should a piece of music or theatre reveal everything about itself on a first hearing or viewing? One member of the Bristol audience – himself a composer of opera – remarked that it had given him a lot to think about, and that is surely a good thing. Several people in both the Bristol and Gloucester audiences said they would like to see it again. Too often there are not second chances to see and hear new music. Fortunately, there are at least two more chances to see Anon this summer, when it plays in the Tête à Tête Festival in London on 26 and 27 July.