Fringe Review

Edinburgh Fringe 2012

Through the Looking Screen

Genre: Opera and Operatic Theatre

Venue: Underbelly, Cowgate

Low Down

Annabel is 27 and her life is a continuous status update. She has used every social media available to carefully cultivate her profile in order to attract the attention of her dishy colleague, Sebastian. Through the Looking Screen by Anne Chmelewsky is an affectionate but unflinching operatic portrayal of an increasingly desperate young woman losing touch with the world beyond her PC and smartphone. Annabel’s life is a tragi-comic tale of our times.

Review

The production stands on two pillars. Firstly there is Chmelewsky’s score and libretto. As we might expect from the creator of The Office: The Opera these are elegant, witty, ornate and yet accessible to an opera newbie like me. Secondly, the show is a showcase of simply magical musical talent. Clare Presland and Amy J Payne are performing the starring role on alternate days. I was privileged to see Payne who is a lively and engaging performer. She takes possession of the stage as soon as she enters holding the audience spell bound with a comic charm. I wish I could phrase something more insightful than that she has a heartstoppingly beautiful voice.

Despite the clever use of a difficult space as well as the inclusion of smart pre-recorded visual material at present the show is not where it could be as a dramatic performance. Elizabeth Challenger’s piano accompaniment is graceful and accomplished but with a little extra from the script she could really begin to hit the comic high notes. These might be a few flourishes of other musical styles to indicate when Annabel is in a bar or at home, or a light touch of interaction with the singer. Annabel is an overly sensitive character and open to gentle teasing.

Chmelewsky is rumoured to have gained a reputation as something of a maverick when she studied at the Guildhall. I can’t recall if I felt any sense of this when I first saw her flyering in a wedding dress amidst the nether regions of the Underbelly, Cowgate. Only at the Fringe will you encounter Miss Havisham on day release. Her great good fortune is to possess both a finely tuned classical ear and an eye for the offbeat comedy of daily life. In another pair of hands this script might have been nothing more than another diverting Bridget Jonesian type amusement.

Instead, Chmelewsky has rendered a script that is thought provoking and funny. There is an interplay of light and shadow which only gradually dawns. In an age where personal independence is so highly prized, what is becoming of those of us who need another person to feel complete?

Reviewed by Dan Lentell 9th August 2012