

Robin Hood: a satirical new opera in Peckham

By Timmy Fisher, 28 February 2019

In a week in which Donizetti's *Lucia di Lammermoor* opens at Zurich's Opernhaus, Verdi's *Aida* at the Met and Adams' *Girls of the Golden West* at the Dutch National Opera – all of which feature a female protagonist, and yet have been produced by teams almost exclusively made up of men – how refreshing it was to open last night's programme and discover that (almost) the entire creative team for Dani Howard's brand-new opera *Robin Hood* are women. A further irony – that the opera documents the shenanigans of an all-male, masonic brotherhood – was not lost on me either.



Nicholas Merryweather (Robin Hood)

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Intensely satirical, *Robin Hood* harnesses age-old themes of loyalty, brotherhood and morality to explore the hypocrisies of the political elite, and the cycles of injustice that a patriarchal society can engender. Robin (Nicholas Merryweather), by day the populist Lord of the Greenwood, who vows to “steal from the rich in order to give to the poor”, is also a member of Bullingdon-esque drinking society The Merry Men, whose members don green tights and indulge in whiskey-fuelled hunting expeditions during the night. The stuffed heads that decorate their dining room (set design by April Dalton) serve as a gruesome reminder of Hood's hypocrisy in promising to protect Greenwood and its wildlife from the encroaching Big Smoke, the neighbouring city symbolised by ruthless property developer Joanna (Lorna Anderson). Indeed, nobody is safe from librettists Zoë Palmer and Rebecca Hurst's satire. Robin's sister Marian (Siân Cameron), the 'woke' environmental activist who condemns her brother's politics is also in cahoots with Joanna. Together they plot to bring down Robin, after he accidentally kills Joanna's son (William Barter-Sheppard) during one of his hunts.

These themes of sanctimony and cyclical injustice are cunningly reflected in the post-minimalist tendencies of Howard's score. Each character is given a distinct melodic flavour to match their particular brand of hypocrisy: Marian's cloying and protracted phrasing rubs up uncomfortably against the boorish outbursts of Will Scarlett (Cliff Zammit Stevens) and a wonderfully acted Little John (Oliver Brignall). Their melodies are worked over and over, constantly shifting throughout the opera's three acts, building tension beneath deceptively stable tonal centres. Such subversion is reminiscent of pioneering chamber opera composer Benjamin Britten who, in *The Turn of the Screw*, warps Miles' 'Malo' theme out of recognition as the ghost of Peter Quint takes hold of the boy.

Similarly, Robin's music begins to contort as visions of the boy he killed become more frequent, and the guilt that torments him magnifies.



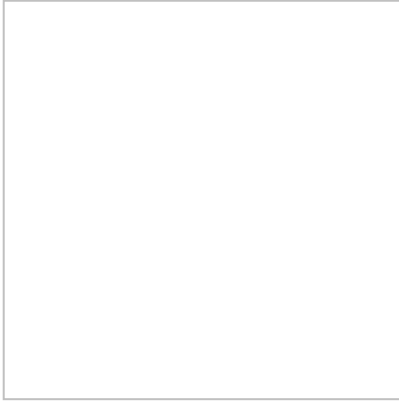
Oliver Brignall (Little John), Cliff Zammit Stevens (Will Scarlet), Nicholas Merryweather

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The music of the singers and of the instrumentalists seem to flow independently of each other, breathing at different moments. Far from making the performance feel disjointed, this duality of movement rather adds to its sense of unease, as though you were standing with feet on separate conveyor belts, each moving at slightly different speeds. Conductor Berrack Dyer did well to simultaneously drive both musical engines. And, if at any point the audience felt in danger of slipping into a reverie, there was no lack of imaginative theatrical devices – handiwork of director Polly Graham – to keep them hooked into the drama. Several seats were left vacant for the singers and, in a cosy space like Peckham's Bussey Building, when sat next to a trained opera singer going at full whack the effect is highly personal and incredibly exciting. Moreover, for the final act the audience is required to move downstairs to an entirely new room, where ice-cold lighting and dead oak branches hanging from the ceiling force both Robin and the audience to confront the consequences of his actions.



Nicholas Merryweather (Robin Hood) and William Barter-Sheppard (The Boy)



Such a successful performance could not have been achieved without the velvety thick sound that emanated from the surprisingly small group of instrumentalists – a credit to both the players and the skill of Howard’s orchestration. One stand-out moment came in the final act, as it dawns on Robin that atonement can only be achieved through taking his own life. A double-stopped double bass rattled away deep in its lowest register, accompanied by a murky bass clarinet and bass drum, perfectly depicting the flabby, festering guilt that grows in the pit of his stomach. Nicholas Merryweather is equally excellent as Robin – expertly toeing the line between arrogance and shame, with a gorgeous, ruby quality to his voice that makes the opera’s climax all the more devastating.

Robin Hood is a witty, accessible new work that would appeal to both opera buffs and hardened thespians. It’s greatest strength lies in it’s score – a sophisticated and incredibly beautiful piece that surely places Howard amongst the best of contemporary British opera composers – no small feat considering she is just 25, and this is her first opera.

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