

## Men behaving badly

**T**he *Opera Story*, dedicated to creating new, story-driven operas, reached its third birthday and commissioned a show devised, written, directed, conducted and designed by women. This was a satire of sorts, though without a solitary laugh: humour was one vital zest missing from *Robin Hood*, composed by Dani Howard to a libretto by Zoe Palmer and Rebecca Hurst. Relentless earnestness can be a wearisome thing.

The idea was promising: paternalistic land-owning politico Robin, who likes huntin' with his Merry Men, disputes with his tree-hugger sister Marian how his forest should be used. Property developer Joanna has plans for some kind of Utopian, plutocratic boutique city on the site. She's also looking for her son, who seems to have been killed in a hunting accident.

Assumptions were made – for example that Robin is 'the kind of English gent most of us love to hate'. Is that useful, even in Peckham? It doesn't feel frightfully sophisticated. Tory (bad!) Robin, with his all-male (BAD!) club and it's quasi-Masonic (aaaagh!) rituals; the (EVIL!) property developer... (I suppose director Polly Graham knows the ground, as the new artistic director of Cotswolds-based Longborough Opera, succeeding her dad, the self-described 'cowboy builder and dealer in property' Martin Graham, who created the place in the teeth of local resistance.)

I had more time for the music. The company wants to make approachable, narrative pieces that won't bother the horses: laudable, if a teeny bit boring and self-limiting. Ms Howard can certainly create interesting sounds and orchestral textures and atmospheres, and musical

drama and pace, and for a first shot at a big lyric piece this was impressive. But I wish she had let herself go a bit more: it was all very polite, nice to listen to, harmonically tiptoeing; mojo inevitably dribbled away as it went on, pacing sagged and we entered that well-known trancey mode of drifty doodles that always goes on too long. But, en route, there were lovely moments and well-driven sections, some gorgeous nature music with distant echoes of Britten's *Bly*, and plenty of vibraphone (always a plus). It was performed with much energy by a strong cast led by Nicholas Merryweather's affable Robin, and tightly controlled by conductor Berrak Dyer. **ON**

★★★

*Below: r-l: Nicholas Merryweather as an affable Robin Hood, with Ciff Zammit Stevens as Will Scarlett and Oliver Brignall as Little John*



ROBERT NORMAN