

The Royal Road to Recovery

DITLEV RINDOM

The Royal Opera House's 2011-12 season began in splendour, finished in triumph but suffered painfully from a drab, unimaginative and cancellation-riddled middle. For many London opera-goers, it appeared that Covent Garden had blown its budget on high-profile stagings of *Il Trittico*, *Les Troyens* and the *Ring Cycle* but had little left to satisfy regular visitors throughout the long winter months except safe revivals of over-familiar productions with casts that offered great professionalism but little excitement. It was lucky, then, that the shows which ended the season were nearly all winners that left one's palate refreshed and eager for the next season to start.



Covent Garden

Pick of the bunch, production-wise, was Robert Carsen's fizzing new production of *Falstaff* (shared with La Scala), which updates the action to the 1950s. Carsen justifies his deployment of this current theatrical cliché with an acute depiction of class rivalry and social mobility: Falstaff is a tweed-clad aristocrat down on his luck, who frequents a wood-panelled gentlemen's club that represents his last hold on respectability; the Ford family, by contrast, are an upwardly mobile, middle class bunch who reside in a Cath Kidston mansion. Fenton is here a waiter at the local restaurant, and when Ford makes his visit to Falstaff, he does so in the guise of a heavy metal rocker, all Rayban sunglasses and leather. Food is omnipresent in Carsen's interpretation: the scene opens with the lord in bed, surrounded by empty plates and squalor, and his attempted seduction of Mistress Ford takes place in her kitchen, a gastroporn fantasy worthy of any glossy cookery programme. Nannetta sweetly laments her misfortune over Haagen Dasz; the characters celebrate their reconciliation at a lavish banquet.

The production is full of Carsen's trademark visual touches, such as the ladies' *parlando* gossiping capped with a bosom-wiggling trill and Mistress Quickly's promises of '*reverenza*' likewise accompanied by naughty leg lifting. The show is so relentlessly entertaining and thoughtful, in fact, that it comes as a disappointment that Carsen has failed to find a

satisfactory way to update the final scene. The threat of wild spirits makes little sense in 1950s England - a magic mushroom hallucination might have worked - so Carsen's decision to play it straight creates a frustrating tonal shift, and no amount of beautiful lighting (or an onstage horse) can cover the cracks in his concept. That said, the previous two hours are a perfectly timed winner, so perhaps the suspension of disbelief is worth it.

Falstaff is the ultimate ensemble piece and Covent Garden assembled a cast low on star power, but who were all coordinated to perfection. Rightly dominating the stage was Ambrogio Maestri, who was born for this character. He possesses not only the *physique du rôle*, but more importantly, the voice: a well-schooled, voluminous baritone, enlivened by his exemplary attention to verbal detail and which could sustain lyrical lines alongside the comic patter. He acted the role magnificently too - the audience loved him. As the object of his lust, Ana Maria Martinez was delightfully teasing and characterised well with her slightly grainy, almost beautiful tone. Dalibor Jenis impressed with his virile baritone, but lacked an ounce of vocal swagger in his bargaining with Falstaff; Kai Ruttel did her best in the thankless role of Mrs Page. As the lovers, Joel Prieto and Amanda Forsythe were nicely matched, her rather old-fashioned, almost Viennese sweetness blending well with his more conventional warmth. Dramatically, he was a little limp, but he could be a persuasive Ferrando. Marie-Nicole Lemieux was a hit as a fruity voiced Mistress Quickly - more than a match for Maestri in their assignation scene. With lithe, sharply characterised conducting from Danielle Gatti, it was a show guaranteed to put a smile on an audience's face; I went twice.

Sexual desire and possession was displayed in less convivial terms in the second revival of David McVicar's *Salome* production. His updating to the Weimar era inevitably sacrifices certain textual references, but it gives the decadence and entropy of Herod's court a shocking modern relevance. Salome oozes knowing, Tamara Lempicka glamour and Herod's prophecies of doom and miracles in Galilee have a metaphorical weight which ring true in this gallery of degradation. Certain elements, particularly the dance, seem to have been simplified and the presentation of Salome as the society's inevitably monstrous offspring hits home with increasing clarity at each revival.

Musically, things were hit and miss, but the essentials were securely delivered. Andris Nelsons gave a coruscating account of the score, carefully pacing the tension until an explosive final scene that nearly blew the roof off. His ear for voicing is fabulous - so many orchestral details came through which often go for nothing and this clarity brought the waltz elements of the score to the fore. Angela Denoke reprised her celebrated Salome, offering greater vocal security than 2010 (despite some faltering intonation) and utterly compelling as a stage animal. Her isiosyncratic vocal production will never be to all tastes, but she dominates the stage. Her colleagues were less memorable - Egils Silins was a dull Jokanaan and neither Stig Anderson nor Rosalind Plowright made much impression as her negligent parents. These flaws did little to dent a gripping night at the opera that, by the last bars, had you by the throat.

The revival of Elijah Moshinsky's staging of *Otello* which finished the season was the best show of the year. His utterly traditional sets tell the story in a conventional, non-intrusive

manner but the lack of visual interest mattered little in the face of such musical ravishment. Under Antonio Pappano, the orchestra and chorus sounded the best they had in months, with an overwhelming opening scene that led into a tense, pulsating account of the great confrontation scenes. As Iago, Lucio Gallo was his usual persuasive self, compensating with verbal detail and canny shifts into head voice for a lack of tonal depth and morbid colour. Antonio Polli made an appealing debut as Cassio - carefree, innocent and handsome, with a lovely Italianate ring which contrasted well with his colleagues. As Emilia, Hanna Hipp built upon her solid reputation at the house.

As the lovers, the Royal Opera House provided the best possible casting today. In the role of Desdemona, Anja Harteros was simply radiant, her shining soprano soaring perfectly across the ensembles and delivering a *Willow Song* and *Ave Maria* that were each a master class in controlled *pianissimi* and flexible phrasing. Her repetitions of "Salce", each one a finely graded diminution of the one before, were heartbreaking: Singing doesn't get better than that. As her husband, Aleksandr Antonenko was a revelation with a thrillingly heroic timbre that he could nonetheless scale down for a tortured "Dio! Mi potevi". He may lack some of the subtler nuances of irony and ambiguity associated with this role, but in an age where great dramatic voices are supposedly dead, here is a Canio, Turiddu, Otello that - vocally at least - can take on the best of recorded history and come out fighting. This was an exhilarating portrayal.

The summer had barely begun before the Royal Opera House resumed rehearsals for the *Ring Cycle*, presented in four consecutive cycles with a strikingly British cast headed by Bryn Terfel's imposing Wotan. Press tickets were limited to print publications, but the combination of Keith Warner's thought-provoking if cluttered production and a musical team that gelled superbly despite vocal inconsistencies made for a compelling whole. With new stagings of *Robert le Diable*, *Evgeny Onegin*, *La Donna del Lago*, *Nabucco*, *Gloriana* and *Written on Skin* to look forward to - as well as some starry revivals featuring Jonas Kaufmann, Angela Gheorghiu and Renee Fleming - audiences can be confident that the house's recent slump won't turn into a double dip.