

Sonya's Story, Riverside Studios, London

Reviewed by Jessica Duchen

Tuesday, 24 August 2010

Chances for creative teams to test-drive operas-in-the-making are few and far between. A big cheer, then, for Tête à Tête, the festival that brings us tomorrow's operas today as works-in-progress amid the welcoming buzz of the Riverside Studios.

A special buzz surrounded Sonya's Story, an adaptation of Chekhov's Uncle Vanya composed by Neal Thornton and directed by the mezzo-soprano Sally Burgess. It has further to grow, of course; this was a trial run of the second half, presumably adapted to fill in the back-story.

It's clear that a great deal of love and care has gone into it. The size is necessarily restricted – two singers, one dancer and six instrumentalists, with conductor Lionel Friend – but there was no compromise on standards. Two superb young singers carried the work: soprano Caryl Hughes as Sonya, on stage throughout and portraying with total conviction those Chekhovian qualities of self-doubt, unrequited love and the quest for a meaningful existence; Cozmin Sime, a Romanian baritone of notable strength and charm, doubled up as Dr Astrov and Uncle Vanya, a task requiring a rapid switch between personalities (plus the donning of beard and green wellingtons) which he brought off with panache.

The play's quiet emotions – bitterness, disappointment, frustration – might seem unlikely in opera, but the team made them work, the action offset by Charles Phu's elegant set design: flowing curtain panels, a painting, a swing for Yelena and a floral circle on the floor, achieved by lighting, which appears to represent Sonya's comfort zone, metaphorically disrupted by the men around her.

Chekhov's words remain as powerful as ever and Thornton's intimate music allows the text to shine. At times the score suggests salon music of Chekhov's era, at others it hints at pastoralism or the harmonies and melodic outlines found in newish West End musicals. Finest is the inspiring conclusion in which Sonya's call for redemption through faith and work feels not too far from "You'll Never Walk Alone".