

Ambition pays off in a dazzling opening weekend

Festival Theatre

Antigone
King's Theatre
Neil Cooper

WHEN Juliette Binoche steps out on to the stage as the doomed Antigone in Ivo van Hove's quasi-contemporary reimagining of Sophocles' Greek soap opera against images of a barren desert no-man's land, it is not as a revolutionary heroine, however purposely she strides. Rather, as the opening argument between Antigone and her sister Ismene makes clear in Anne Carson's new translation, she is in mourning for her brother Polyneikes, who has been slain in the Theban civil war, while her other brother has been honoured by King Kreon.

In a stately, suitably funereal affair, it becomes clear too that in the fall-out of such close-to-home collateral damage, that this is a family at war with each other and tearing itself apart now their world has been rocked by such a bereavement. The Chorus here are battle-weary survivors, and at times it's as if they're sleep-walking to their own destiny as slow-motion footage of city street scenes flickers behind them. The effect of this is that when a black tie-wearing Kreon, a steely Antigone and a furious Teiresias do explode into anger, the effect is all the more shocking.

Carson's translation is an easy mix of classical portents and modern lingo of the "top-notch" variety, and Van Hove's direction for this co-production between Théâtre de la Ville - Paris, Ruhrfestspiele Recklinghausen and Edinburgh International Festival is painstakingly played out on Jan Versweyeld's set dominated by a giant moon.

It is the performances here that matter, however, with Patrick O'Kane a forceful presence as Kreon, Kirsty Bushell an equally charismatic Ismene and Binoche a mighty sparrow full of heart in this most battle-scarred of everyday tragedies. Supported by the Pirie Rankin Charitable Trust.

Festival Opera

The Last Hotel
Royal Lyceum Theatre
Keith Bruce

DONNACHA Dennehy and Enda Walsh's chamber opera is, it is fair to say, a challenging work. Premiering at the EIF in a staging by Landmark Productions and Wide Open Opera that will go on to the Dublin Theatre Festival, it may be small scale but it is still a major piece. With just three singing cast, it is a big ask of the small company, and in the two

women in particular - Claudia Boyle and Katherine Manley - the composer and librettist could hardly be better served.

But The Last Hotel also demands a great deal of the audience, and a read of Walsh's synopsis before curtain-up is not so much helpful as essential. This "Last Hotel" is a venue for assisted dying, but whose death is being rehearsed is debatable. The libretto is opaque at best and often very dense indeed.

Played out on a steeply raked platform, often divided and limited to smaller areas by the lighting, the staging also makes use of various primitive devices, like a slide show of property porn, and a string of fairy lights and coloured balloons. It is almost as if Walsh the director is constantly aiming to undermine the seriousness of Walsh the writer.

Difficult though it is to dismiss these anxieties, Dennehy's music is powerful stuff, and superbly played by his own Crash Ensemble under André de Ridder. Including our own Owen Gunnell on percussion among the dozen virtuosos in the pit, the band is worth the ticket price on its own. When the instrumental score combines with the singing of the sopranos, The Last Hotel really does soar, and it ceases to matter terribly much that the message in the work is so wilfully obscure.

Festival Music

Nash Ensemble
Queen's Hall
Michael Tumelty

IS THERE a better-equipped, more polished, stylish, or characterful chamber music group than the Nash Ensemble anywhere on the planet? To judge from the near-immaculate account of Schubert's Octet with which they concluded their Festival concert on Saturday, launching the Queen's Hall morning concerts, I doubt it.

Yet for all the pristine playing of the individual musicians, every one of them a name player in his or her own right, and for all the collective sparkle, wit, tenderness, drama and playfulness that informed their multiple exchanges throughout the pages of this great multi-movement masterpiece, the secret that ignited and unified their Octet performance on Saturday was their command of momentum.

It's a master work, yes, but it's a very long piece, takes up a lot of space and, with all those movements, it can seem to drag. I've heard one performance that almost ran aground. There was not a trace of drag or of time stretching out in the Nash performance: it just kept moving forward all the time, fluidly, from



DAZZLING: Simon McBurney's mind-expanding exploration of human consciousness in The Encounter.



FRENCH CONNECTION: Juliette Binoche appears in Sophocles' Greek soap opera Antigone.

one lyrical delight to the next, without force or hustle. But the real thrill in this Nash concert was the performance of Vaughan Williams' Piano Quintet, which I've not heard before and which came as a revelation. It's a young man's work, from 1903, withdrawn by VW in 1918 and allowed out to play only in 1999. It's described as "Brahmsian". It's not really, but it is a Romantic cracker in which VW capitalised on his use of the solo double bass by generating rich, dark brown textures. Fabulous.

Festival Music
BBC SSO - The Opening Concert
Usher Hall
Michael Tumelty

LET'S get the heart right out on

the old sleeve and go straight for the jugular before I wheel out another barrel load of clichés.

The opening concert of the Edinburgh International Festival on Saturday night was not the busiest I have seen. Why not? Well, it wasn't the sexiest programme on the calendar to start with.

Donald Runnicles programmed two choral rarities by Brahms to open the night, marking 50 years of the Edinburgh Festival Chorus. Despite adding a few choral sweeteners in the form of a clutch of the much-loved Liebeslieder Waltzes, these two pieces gave a tough, serious feel to the launch concert. But that in fact was its strength.

These two pieces ARE tough, serious pieces, and doing stuff like this is the business of festivals; apart from which, the Schicksalsied, which I don't think

I've heard before in concert, contains some of the most beautiful music that has come my way, and upon which the chorus lavished some of its warmest, most ravishing tone.

And thereafter, it was down to Runnicles and the SSO in a stonking performance of Strauss's Ein Heldenleben, whose central solo violin part was played heroically by leader Laura Samuel in the face of the Tattoo fireworks, which seemed to have re-synchronised themselves in time with the Usher Hall event.

At the core of Strauss's autobiographical extravaganza, which some folk see as hot air, lies a fantastically-unified and integrated symphonic poem. And that, at high voltage, is what Runnicles and his BBC battalion delivered on Saturday. It was outstanding.

Festival Theatre

The Encounter
Edinburgh International
Conference Centre
Neil Cooper

IT IS not immediately apparent that the man in jungle fatigues and army cap who slips on to a stage littered with microphones, speakers and a smorgasbord of hi-tech 21st-century kit is Simon McBurney.

Nor that his jokey demonstrations of sensurround binaural sound in between taking pictures of a headphone-clad audience on his iPhone for his children means the show has begun.

But then, defining the beginning of time itself is what drives McBurney's mind-expanding exploration of human consciousness in this world premiere of a co-production between McBurney's Complicité company, Edinburgh International Festival and a host of suitably pan-global partners.

Inspired by Romanian writer Petru Popescu's book, Amazon Beaming, The Encounter ostensibly tells the story of National Geographic photographer Loren McIntyre, who in 1969 stumbled upon the Mayoruna tribe on the edge of Portugal and Brazil.

McIntyre's experience with a people already pillaged by white western developers is enlightening enough in its consciousness-raising voyage into the unknown. McBurney's telling, however, transcends the story's roots to become part action-packed adventure, part immersive meditation, peppered throughout with an aural cut-up of scientific commentary, a contemporary classical underscore and the voices of McBurney's own children bringing him back down to earth.

McBurney and his army of collaborators, who include designer Michael Levine, sound designer Gareth Fry and co-director Kirsty Housley, have integrated a dazzling technical display into McBurney's journey.

At the piece's heart is McIntyre and McBurney's encounter, not just with a lost civilisation attempting to preserve their purity, but with their very being and an entirely constructed western so-called civilisation they navigate their way through in an astonishing theatrical feat where discovery is all.

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