



La Calisto at Longborough review



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CAPTIVATING REALISATION OF A BAROQUE OPERA

LA CALISTO
Longborough Festival Opera *****

Longborough is a chocolate-box Cotswold village: about the last place that you'd expect to find yourself mired in the sleazy aftermath of a Friday night on Broad Street. But then, a lot of things about Cavalli's 1651 opera La Calisto are not as you might expect. Girls become bears, gods become goddesses and at least one character contemplates intimacy with a goat. Cavalli's music turns on a ha'penny, and in Mathilde Lopez's production, conducted and (brilliantly) arranged by Lesley Anne Sammons, high-baroque elegance can metamorphose at any moment into cocktail jazz, urban funk or the raunchiest of tangos.

So while the action took place in what looked like a grubbier corner of the old Paradise Circus (but with more cartoon animal heads), the action glittered with lurid, eye-popping colour. Baroque purists would have squealed the house down: the clarinet, accordion, recorders and bass guitar of Sammons's Barefoot Band could hardly have been less authentic. Yet their freewheeling, fantastical reinvention of Cavalli's score was a triumph, presenting this flamboyant omnisexual drama of lust, jealousy, pleasure and pain as the musically sumptuous, utterly modern entertainment that Cavalli surely intended.

The cast was a knockout too. Chiara Vinci, as Calisto sang with a ringing purity that melted in the mouth as she told of unspoken pleasures (what happens in Diana's grotto stays in Diana's grotto). Emma Charles was spirited and then shockingly vulnerable as her counterpart, the nymphomaniac nymph Linfea, and as the shepherd Endimione Brian McAlea and his flock of inflatable sheep gave the show its all-too-fragile heart – easy meat for the droog-like animal instincts of James Gribble's Pane. Zita Syme and Sophie Goldrick were respectively imperious and imposing as the goddesses Giunone and Diana.

And strutting, swaggering and seducing their way across the stage in spangly suits - every smirk oozing slick, amoral entitlement - Felix Kemp as Giove, and Neil Balfour as his beatboxing (and how!) wingman Mercurio, just kept boogying away with the whole show. Boy, it looked fun to be them. No pat morality here: just human nature stripped bare – titillating, shocking and appallingly enjoyable. I don't know when I last saw a less prissy, more captivating realisation of a baroque opera, and in a fairer universe, this production would become an instant classic. Fingers crossed for a revival.

Richard Bratby



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