

# Chocolate with a dark, cheeky flavour

Sam Mendes-directed musical opens; new song-cycle at City of London Festival; Ashton's 'Sylvia' in New York

## THEATRE

## Charlie and the Chocolate Factory

Theatre Royal, Drury Lane, London

★★★★☆

Ian Shuttleworth

Increasingly, stage musicals of movies have become matters of re-creation, reproducing the mood of the viewing experience and sometimes every possible detail. David Greig's adaptation, then, deserves respect for shying away almost entirely from Tim Burton's 2005 film and giving only the occasional nod to the 1971 version, and feeling free even to embroider on Roald Dahl's original book. The first sign of this is an entirely new projected opening sequence (based around drawings by Quentin Blake) on the chocolate-making process itself.

It is dramatically sensible to make the five lucky children's entry into Willy Wonka's factory the climax of Act One, but this entails dwelling rather longer beforehand on the penalty of Charlie and the Bucket family, and trying to maintain a tone of "poor but happy". It also compresses the time in the factory itself, leading to a slight assembly-line feel: new fantastical Mark Thompson-designed room; misfortune befalls one of the horrible children; musical number from the Oompa-Loompas; next fantastical room...

Greig's adaptation, and Sam Mendes' production, do well at matching the Dahlian blend of wonder, darkness and cheek. (Some passing gags are not even explicated: sharper viewers will notice that Violet Beauregard meets her comeuppance via flavour no. 3.14159, blueberry *pi*.) Mendes seems even to be cheeking the venue's own recent history, its hosting of the stage musical of *Shrek*: I'll see your Lord Farquaad played by an actor dancing on his knees, he suggests, and raise you an entire chorus-line of Oompa-Loompas doing likewise (and thereby avoiding the issue of casting actors of restricted growth).

Marc Shaiman and Scott Wittman already have the musical success of *Hairspray* under their belts (is that a mixed metaphor?), but it is hard to escape the impression that the combination of sharp lyrics and golden-age melodies here has been



influenced by Tim Minchin's game-raising work on *Matilda*. As for the acting, musicals are where Douglas Hodge cuts loose (footloose); his Willy Wonka dialogue still feels a little strained, but he will soon relax into it.

Overall, the brief in this case clearly is one of visual ravishment plus warm glow, and Mendes, Greig and all concerned come up to the mark. It is flavoursome yet familiar, and above all it won't rot your teeth.

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## CLASSICAL MUSIC

## City of London Festival

Drapers' Hall, London

★★★★☆

Richard Fairman

Going to events in the City of London Festival is a double pleasure, as the venues are as much a draw as the music. The festival has traditionally focused on the city's historic livery halls and churches, which host the majority of the concerts, but this year

is also looking further afield for inspiration.

The theme of the 2013 festival is conflict and resolution. This extends to other walled cities in Europe and beyond, in particular Derry-Londonderry, which is celebrating City of Culture status this year – an opportunity to mark the unique link created in 1613 when the Irish city received the finance to build its city walls from the livery companies of the City of London.

These various interests were rolled together in a new commission for the festival's opening night. *Trees, Walls, Cities* is a collaborative song cycle for mezzo-soprano and string quartet, which brings together composers and poets from eight walled cities, most with some history of internal conflict. Styles and content vary wildly, and it fell to Nigel Osborne to compose linking music to try and hold the whole package together.

At nearly an hour the resulting work is too long, mainly because there has been no single creative hand to shape it. But there were some individual voices at work: Christopher Norby (Derry-Londonderry) and Jocelyn

Pook (London) employing simple means to deliver complex messages; Theo Verbey (Utrecht) and Habib Shehadeh Hanna (Jerusalem) mining older musical styles; Isidora Zebeljan (Dubrovnik) setting folk rhythms spinning; Soren Nils Eichberg (Berlin) and Gerald Resch (Vienna) turning to expressionist word settings; and, going one step further, Yannis Kyriakides (Nicosia) offering little more than a halo of music while the four members of the Brodsky Quartet recited Mehmet Yashin's very personal poem "Walls have Ears". It should not have worked, but the diversity of the songs only added to the cumulative effect.

Mezzo Lore Lixenberg made a heroic job of surmounting the cycle's far-flung technical demands and was earlier the sensitive soloist in the impressionist Verlaine settings of Philip Hammond's *Chanson d'automne*. The Brodskys also gave a wholehearted performance of Elgar's barnstorming Piano Quintet; altogether an indigestible programme, but the festival is off to an ambitious start.

www.colf.org

## DANCE

## Sylvia

American Ballet Theatre, New York

★★★★☆

Apollinaire Scherr

At *Sylvia* the other night, there flashed into my mind a famous choreographer's warning that no good comes of pondering a ballet's plot. And yet Ashton's 1952 story ballet begins so promisingly, you want to think about it.

Fauns and naiads descend into loving huddles while nymph Sylvia – acolyte of fierce, chaste goddess Diana – discovers her animal pleasures in the hunt, surrounded by a sisterhood armed with bows, arrows and steely legs. Sylvia raises a fist, swings her free leg like a pendulum, spins on one foot and then, in the same direction, the other, and bursts into the air with chest open and arms in a V for victory. On Tuesday, Gillian Murphy span out the tricky steps with imperious ease.

In *Sylvia*, it is the man who first begs for love. Shepherd Aminta flattens his body into wide, straight lines that make him seem less open-hearted than one-dimensional. Marcelo Gomes executed the thankless steps impeccably. But perhaps out of loyalty to bland Aminta, he ironed out his trademark luxuriance. Only dullards pine for the impossible, Ashton suggests. The likes of Sylvia and her rapacious admirer Orion seize the moment.

Every move in the first act brings out the story – the whirl of young womanhood, the goofy improbability of love, the incompleteness that an unrequited lover suffers. Once Eros sends an arrow into Sylvia's heart, though, the story wilts a bit. After its pastoral beginnings, *Sylvia* jets forward to parody the Orientalist ballet before heading into *Sleeping Beauty* terrain, with its processionals, storybook characters and plucky steps for the ballerina. As for the story, Orion drags Sylvia off to his lair, where she offers her body for a freedom that consists of donning a prissy pink tutu so she can be handled like an expensive statue.

Still, if Murphy (and the rest of the Sylvias this week) were to treat each act as a distinct episode in the young woman's self-fashioning, we would all have more fun. When Sylvia seduces her captor in the cave, for example, she manufactures a marathon of hoochie-coochie variations: exhausting, sure, but why not also exhilarating? The nymph is choosing her moves.

www.abt.org

Visual ravishment: 'Charlie and the Chocolate Factory', with Douglas Hodge as Willy Wonka. Below: Gillian Murphy in 'Sylvia'

Helen Maybanks  
Rosalee O'Connor



# The double bill that wasn't

## OPERA

## Bluebeard's Castle

Tianjin Grand Theatre, China

★★★★☆

Ken Smith

Call it the Case of the Missing Mandarin. On the opening night of a well-advertised double bill of Bartók's one-act opera and his pantomime ballet *The Miraculous Mandarin*, the ballet was nowhere to be seen. Also missing was Lin Zhaozhua, one of China's most distinguished theatre artists, who had been billed as director. Instead, the programme for *Bluebeard's Castle* credited Yi Liming, a frequent Lin collaborator previously announced as the production's scenic designer. No clues were found, no alibis offered.

Since its opening in April 2011, the Tianjin Grand Theatre has made great strides in rectifying the city's cultural imbalance with Beijing, a 30-minute bullet-train ride away. With a new resident orchestra under conductor Muhai Tang, the Grand Theatre inaugurated a western opera season in March with a local production of *Tosca*, with a visiting *Eugene Onegin* in May from Moscow's Stanislavsky and Nemirovich-Danchenko Musical Theatre, and a Verdi series scheduled for July from the Hungarian State Opera (which explains the singers in *Bluebeard*). Clearly the Grand Theatre has made great advances but on the basis of its second local production, communication with the public is not one of them.



Charm: Krisztian Cser and Andrea Melath in 'Bluebeard's Castle'

That said, the sizeable crowd in the house for this performance was treated to an impromptu 25-minute introduction to the opera by Tang himself, leading the orchestra in a preview of the score's musical themes – a move that, besides filling a *Mandarin*-sized gap, also played heavily to the Grand Theatre's mission of arts education. Bartók, by virtue of collecting folk music among peasants, has always been seen in China as the most ideologically correct of western modernists. His work, though, is rather less known, and perhaps for both audiences and a fledgling orchestra is best taken in small doses.

The orchestra's playing, though hardly polished, became rough in a

way that made dramatic sense. Likewise Krisztian Cser's Bluebeard exuded charm and menace in equal measure while Andrea Melath's Judith unfolded in layers of shaded emotional intensity.

Visually, Yi's production conveyed a similar focus, with a spiral staircase essentially becoming a backdrop for layers of red and gold lighting offset by shadow. Even the surtitles, which carried a Chinese translation in bright red characters, seemed of a piece with the overall design. Only the stage movement fell short in inspiration, though the physical pacing was entirely consistent with the musical tempo.

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## Happening

### Miró: Poetry and Light

**What:** A retrospective of the modern master's final three decades

**Where:** Fondation de l'Hermitage, Lausanne

**When:** June 28-October 27

**Details:** From 1956 until his death in 1983 Joan Miró lived and worked in Palma, Majorca, the birthplace of his life-long spouse, Pilar Juncosa. Settled in a huge workshop, purpose-built for him by the Catalan architect Josep Lluís Sert, Miró worked with prolific ease. Inspired by the natural world on his doorstep, he stated in 1957 that "Majorca is poetry and light."

Lausanne's l'Hermitage

now borrows 80 of Miró's Majorcan works – including oils, sculptures and works on paper – from the Pilar and Joan Miró Foundation in Palma, the artist's former



studio and now museum, in an exhibition showcasing the increasingly pared-down style the Spanish artist was drawn to in later life, as well as his island environment, abstract expressionism and far-eastern calligraphy were significant influences.

Birds, handprints and women are the recurrent symbols here, though simplified almost to the point of abstraction – a sense intensified by the fact that most are untitled and many undated. In one such picture (left), a snake-like figure kneels in profile, while overhead the bottom half of a woman in a red dress floats upwards and out of frame. Intuitive and apparently naive, the image

would not look out of place beneath a proud parent's fridge magnet.

Other pieces bear the trace of Miró's earlier style. 1973's "Oiseaux" is a brooding oil and acrylic on canvas, depicting birds clashing in flight. Like other works from the period, it demonstrates a bold freedom of technique, using heavy black ink and blotted pigment.

Towards the end of his life, Miró abandoned his brushes in favour of his fingers, making his marks on cardboard, wood and other unusual surfaces: a reflection of the inventiveness that was one of his defining traits.

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