

Opera Naked

Unexpected Opera at the St James Theatre Studio, London SW1, October 17

Lynn Binstock has been a staff director at ENO for years, and her company Unexpected Opera, apart from creating work for singers, has trodden the paring-down-opera path fearlessly. This cabaret-style show, which ran for eight performances in the clubby St James Studio, was thoroughly informed by her experience. Although her approach was affectionate and often sentimental, she was spot-on about the sacrifices singers inflict on themselves—missed holidays, botched relationships, the difficulties of starting a family, the endless anxiety about hygiene and the health of La Voce. The four singers we heard from were all in flight from eminently more sensible careers, and they each related their decisions to make the leap into opera with disarming candour. Their tales of auditions, the erratic financial rewards and their enslavement to singing teachers were hugely entertaining and, in the case of the tenor Anthony Flaum, who had a long haul back to performance after an accident, moving as well. Singers' legendary inflated egos were sent up—rather lightly, I thought, considering their legacy of ripe anecdote—and they all admitted to their addiction to the emotional high of performance.

Their guide through this vale of smiles and tears was the Compère, gleefully played by Tom Murphy, who started off as a white-coated analyst (i.e. you don't have to be mad to want to be a singer, but it helps) and moved on to coach, leery casting director and even leerier conductor. The singers themselves rose to the occasion in their solos. Flaum (a memorable Lensky for Nevill Holt) set the ball rolling with an artless, radiant Prince's aria from *Rusalka* and was wonderfully intense in the final duet from *Il ritorno d'Ulisse*. The baritone Richard Immerglück cast an instant, mystic Wagnerian glow in 'Mein holder Abendstern', and was an attractively saturnine boulder in Onegin's Act 1 aria. The mezzo Ciara Hendrick, who had regaled us with her soprano/mezzo Fach-finding problems, closed the show's first half with a spectacularly assured 'Dopo notte' from *Ariodante* and strutted her sultry stuff in the Habanera from *Carmen*. Joanna Weeks seized her show-stealing opportunity in her heartfelt 'Vissi d'arte', the theme tune of the show, and showed that she is no slouch in the camp melodrama department in 'Divinités du Styx' from *Alceste*. The pianist Berrak Dyer was much more than accompanist—she really fanned the arias into life. The audience, who looked as though they might be more familiar with caustic stand-up comedy, lapped it up. PETER REED