

scrupulously lit by Nick Shelton, she rejects the easy option of people pretending to be animals and adopts the subtler one of animals pretending to be people – and people in Moravia in the twenties at that. Thus Helen Field, who sings the role of the Vixen, wears a shifty, slithery flapper style dress circa 1925, and a long orange boa marvellously suggest her foxy brush; the Badger (sung by Julian Moyle) becomes more badger than badger by simply being dressed in voluminous leather motoring coat and a fur hat of the Stutz Bearcat era: the splendidly silly Hens fuss domestically in white Mother Hubbards over bright red socks and under bright red bobble-hats. There is no cartooning; what we get and believe in is the very *essence* of the animals presented. All of which might be enough to identify a winning style, but, now, Maria Bjørnson turns up again as designer for the Royal Shakespeare Company’s new ‘Mid-summer Night’s Dream’ which Ron Daniels has produced at Stratford, and this time she is doing something quite different. With nice lighting by Chris Ellis, and with Ali Bongo (the programme says) as ‘Consultant on Magic’, she achieves another willing suspension of disbelief for the lovely *mélange* of courtly love, fairy frolics and coarse acting by the rude mechanicals that Shakespeare’s poetry elegantly brings off – and so many stagings have fallen flat over. This time she uses the style of a Pollocks Theatre or a Victorian dolls house flying in set-pieces in genuine cardboard, dressing the girls *à la* Kate Greenaway, her mechanicals as proper 19th century tradesmen, and ‘realising’ the fairies as wax-faced articulated rod-puppets (Barry Smith is the puppet-master) hand held by their black-clad ‘voices over’. You *watch* enthralled . . . and, while it’s all happening, you can’t remember any other production you’ve seen . . .

What CUE, in our questing role of Peter

Quince (As Joiner, Stage Manager, and as The Epilogue we never get to hear) would like to ask is how Maria Bjornson gets it all together so wittily, so well, and so often.

Crying ‘Wolf’

Worried by a note in the programme: ‘Members of the audience are advised to take appropriate precautions if they are sensitive to rapid lighting effects’ we went and talked to Steven Pimlott *before* going to see ‘Der Freischütz’ for English National Opera North. He explained some of the horns of some of the dilemmas a producer is confronted with if, in all good conscience, he wishes to stay faithful to the historic importance and the traditional text



The ENON’s *Der Freischütz* production.
 Conductor: Clive Timms, Producer: Steven Pimlott, Designer: John Fraser.
 (photo Simon Warner)

of this seminal Romantic opera, which was already quite set in its ways when it was first performed in England in 1824. ‘Part of the trouble,’ he says ‘is that Friederich Kind did his libretto in nine days, and Weber took three years over the music – they could hardly be said to have really got together over it. What we have, of course, is some marvellous music built round a stern but fair morality play . . . and some of the dottiest dialogue and stage directions one is ever asked to cope with’. These last seem to have caused trouble as early as the *first* dress rehearsal in 1821. The gigantic owl(sic), which is one of the succession of things that have to go bump in the Wolf’s Glen, met with an accident that disabled one of its wings and simply *drooped* across the stage, the oil lamps intended to convey its threatening eyes looking more like drunken street lamps. The fireworks for the Fiery Carriage didn’t go off, and the Fiery Wheel that has to cross the stage was revealed simply as a rather old cartwheel bumping through. Not that these small mishaps – in Victorian times quite a few performances seem to have ended in the arrival of the fire-brigade – appear to have detracted one whit from our forebears’ fascination and morbid satisfaction in the romantic goings-on. ‘The trouble nowadays’, Steven Pimlott says ‘is that British audiences are rather cynical about the *sturm und drang* bit . . . and it doesn’t help that singers *hate* dialogue. Then, if you take the stage directions too literally, and try to convey wild boars and fiery wheels realistically, all you get is the wrong *kind* of laughter in all the wrong places. What I’ve tried to do – to produce the authentic frissons is to visualise a good Hammer Films version, with overtones, I think, of good Dennis Wheatley. But what I’d really like to do with ‘Freischütz’ if I were starting from scratch with no costs barred (this production was designed to tour, and we met it on the too wide and too shallow stage of the New Theatre in Oxford: CUE) would be to work much more with *lighting* within darkness for the effects and the general atmosphere’.

In the event we see what Steven Pimlott means. The ‘apparitions’ are ingeniously contrived by the use of a mixture of puppetry (Ariane Gastambide designed them, John Casson worked them) and lighting effects (Mark Henderson). But since, in succession, we have to identify, as invoked by Samiel the Black Huntsman, that gigantic owl flapping, the ghost of someone’s mother gibbering, a wild boar boring through, some fiery wheels whirling, a Wild Hunt etc etc there tends to be the same ‘Whatever *next?*’ reaction occasioned by the phenomena conjured up for Macbeth by the black and midnight hags (there, too, all one’s sympathies go out to the producer for the ultimate stage direction: ‘Enter a show of eight kings, the last with a glass in his hand’).

If we are to have more ‘magic’ on the stage – and the omens are good, and the machinery is ready – perhaps this is CUE’s cue to plead once more that Lighting Designers and Directors are called on for their ideas *before* a style of production is decided on, rather than after it has been.

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