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Admeto at the Festival Theatre

In Doris Dörrie's Japanese-style production, fresh from the Göttingen Handel Festival, 200 minutes of Handel's music fly by

Richard Morrison



Handel has had many exotic stagings in recent years, but Japanesing the Euripides-based story of Admeto into a tale of Samurai warriors is probably a first. A delectable first, too. In Doris Dörrie's production, fresh from the Göttingen Handel Festival, 200 minutes of music fly by. It's brilliantly played by the period-instrument FestspielOrchester Göttingen, directed with fine sensibility and sensuality by Nicholas McGegan; while on stage a mixture of dancers and singers, comedy and pathos, beguiles the eye yet also probes the opera's dark side.

Admeto is rich in mystery as well as beautiful arias. It opens with an astonishing solo in which the king (Tim Mead, rounded in timbre and noble in demeanour) dreams his own death. A baleful offstage voice tells his queen, Alceste (Marie Arnet, light-toned but affecting in *Madam Butterfly* robes) that he will die unless someone else does in his place. She promptly kills herself; a gorgeous red cloth unfurled to depict her spreading blood.

The distraught king pleads with his muscles, Hercules (William Berger, splendidly blubbered out as a sumo wrestler), to descend into Hades, fend off the Furies — cue for martial arts display — and bring her back. He does. But by then a rival princess, Antigona, improbably disguised as a gardener (Kirsten Blaise, singing with flute-like grace), has set her sights on the king, though his villainous brother Trasimede (David Bates, plangent and incisive) has designs on her.

It's a right old tangle. But Dörrie cuts through that by using the Japanese-style translucent screens of Bernd Lepel's set, aided by Linus Fellbom's symbolic lighting, to convey a world in which the divide between living and dead is shadowy and porous. The resurrected Alceste is stalked by her dead alter ego (the remarkable Japanese butoh dancer Tadashi Endo). She seems to exorcise this sepulchral soul by reclaiming her husband, but an ingenious final *coup de théâtre* suggests how temporal her death-defying victory is.

Dörrie wisely leavens all this heavy-duty metaphysics with countless wry touches. Hercules hilariously fights off a bevy of amorous topless maidens. An entire Poussin-style set appears — and just as suddenly disappears — in Act III's farcical shenanigans, perhaps to suggest the here-today-gone-tomorrow nature of human affairs. Best of all the marvellous Mamu Dance Theatre, dressed as sheep, constantly crawl and baa across the stage, conveying bemusement, indignation or sympathy for the messed-up humans around them. Weird, but delightful.

Further show tonight: 0131-473 2000

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