

Der Vampyr

Gothic Opera at Grimeborn, Arcola Theatre, London, August 14

'I have an urgent appointment with your femoral artery,' ran the line that reassured audiences they could snigger in London's shabby-chic Arcola Theatre and relax into this



Conall O'Neill, Milena Knauss and Gráinne Gillis in Gothic Opera's production of 'Der Vampyr'

thing called opera. It was one of several moments that promised body horror and delivered on their word, so if you take your *guignol* grand with an extra shot, this was for you. Looking back on *Der Vampyr* in the cold light of day it's hard to believe how entertaining it was, arteries, entrails and all. That's because while the blood-letting was excessive, knowingly so, it had more in common with Punch and Judy than torture porn.

Although Heinrich Marschner composed his most enduring work nigh on 200 years ago (memo to Gothic Opera: centenary revival in 2028?) it still sounds fresh today, even on its own terms, and deserves a place on the edge of the operatic canon. What this fresh young company has done, for the second time since its inception in 2019, is to rip it open and extract the fun while keeping the corpse of Marschner's score quivering yet alive. Imaginatively reorchestrated by the conductor Kelly Lovelady for an unlikely quartet of piano/harmonium, cello, double bass and sousaphone, the music's harmonic and melodic flow rumbled satisfyingly along the bass clef, punctuated every now and then by fright whistles and piercing shrieks.

The staging by Julia Mintzer was simple but grim, ingeniously designed by Charles Ogilvie to allow Will Alder's lighting to strike atmospheric patterns. The centrepiece, a coffin on a dais, was kept busy housing assorted body parts and remains of the gleeful dead. It was properly gothic but also Brechtian, with theatrical grunge, lowbrow comedy (including a swordfight of priapic innuendo) and episodic storytelling. The mood turned on a sixpence from swearsy wordplay through sweeping musical romance to schlock horror.

Mintzer's twist on the opera was to take its inherent misogyny (the vampire, Lord Ruthven, despatches three female victims to join the undead) and give the women agency. They outlive the evil aristocrat—who suffers an inevitable death by crucifix—and spit on his grave. However, amid all the hilarity and violence this moral adjustment emerged as neither here nor there and would probably have passed unnoticed were it not for a director's note in the programme.

The Italian bass-baritone Giuseppe Pellingra was a charismatic anti-hero, appropriately tall, dark and gruesome, not to mention elegantly epicene with a mane of flying hair. He imbued Ruthven with a seductive evil that was irresistible, even though the role's intense physicality occasionally pulled his vocal elegance into waywardness.

Milena Knauss, Amber Reeves and Madeleine Todd gave pitch-perfect vocal performances as Ruthven's prey, while the contralto Gráinne Gillis sang with magnetic allure as the shapeshifting Vampire Master. There was good work too from Jack Roberts, Conall O'Neill and Matthew Scott Clark as the living men, underused and interchangeable though they seemed to be.

The intractable problem at the production's heart, however, was the decision to jump between German (for the sung music) and English (for Ogilvie's toothsome witty spoken dialogue). Every linguistic switch jarred and left a conviction that it would have worked better in full translation throughout. Oh, and there was a giant teddy bear. What was that all about? No matter; by the curtain call, the stage was awash with blood and body parts and all was well with the world.

MARK VALENCIA