

MARILYN KINGWILL

**ert**  
**G/Dean**  
**enham Festival**

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FINCH

fter decades of “Brett who?”, the Australian composer Brett Dean at last, and more than deservedly, finds himself flavour of the year in this The big splash will be the remiere of his opera *Bliss* at gh. Meanwhile, here in am he is resident artist, with rformances in six days. Dean’s val showcase as conductor and r was the British premiere of nute suite of six miniatures, ions. It was exquisitely ed at the Pitville Pump Room rmingham Contemporary roup, for future broadcast in ; *Discovering Music* slot. mposer’s early work with rock is and with sampling gy has enabled him to create seductive and cogent ental sonorities in his search ssibilities of studio-like sound with live players. Memory is

another absorbing interest here. The rising plume of clarinet writing with which the first miniature, *Essence*, begins is recollected in the potent nocturnal of *Dead of Night*, with its haunting double-bass pizzicato. I loved, too, the inter-threaded horn and clarinet of *Relic*, and the final piece, *Locket*, with its Clara Schumann song rising up in sudden rhapsody from the piano amid sliding sighs of memory and the dull boom of a bass struck by a timpani stick. The slipping and sliding of Brett’s multilayered language is the perfect vehicle for seeing into the madness and music of Hugo Wolf. His *Wolf Lieder* also reveals the deeply observant and compassionate side of Dean as composer, as five songs (here splendidly sung by Claire Booth) explore the sad psychodrama of Wolf’s dementia.

Earlier in the evening, at the Town Hall, Andrew Motion was suddenly “unable to appear” at a performance of Vivaldi’s *Four Seasons* to be interspersed with four of his own “new sonnets”. Adam Rayner gabbled their pastel-hued seasonal musings instead; but the day was really saved by the fresh and fantasy-filled playing of 12 members of the European Union Chamber Orchestra, directed by Hans-Peter Hofman, and with Alina Ibragimova as a typically feisty soloist.

**Theatre**  
**I was Looking at the Ceiling ...**  
**Theatre Royal, E15**

★★★★☆

LIBBY PURVES

**W**e’re in LA. A fierce black nurse is lecturing mournful Consuelo, a Salvadorean illegal immigrant, on contraception. She protests: “Each of my children comes from something I believe in, a lover I never want to forget.” Nurse Leila — yelling “use condoms, or go to the movies instead!” — is a belting pop voice (Cynthia Erivo) and the lovelorn Latina is Anna Mateo (*pictured with Erivo*), richly operatic.

Around them, beneath a tangled urban ceiling of neon, scaffolding and cables, gather the rest. Here’s Dewain, who has stolen two bottles of beer, Mike the uptight white cop, Tiffany the TV twinkie who rides in Mike’s car filming arrests, Rick the Vietnamese defence attorney and David the philandering preacher. Each of their voices and styles is different, keyed to their character. David in particular was a casting headache: the co-director



Matthew Xia found it hard to locate “a funky young black man outside opera who can reach top E”.

There is wit: a wickedly sexy song by the women about the male body makes *Sex and the City* look anaemically prim. The politics are gentle, with all the bittersweet sensibility of melting-pot America: “For days I been dreamin’ ’bout changing the news — but sometimes the news ain’t something you choose.” The emotional line of John Adams’s music never falters, whether in a love scene about muddled sexual orientation or an obligato grumble from Dewain, resenting his defence lawyer’s claim that stealing is in his “culture” as a young black man.

For some reason this show failed in 1990’s America. Maybe we’ll do it justice. The title song is from a remark by a survivor of the 1994 earthquake: June Jordan, the librettist, read it and suggested to Adams that they use the earthquake as a *deus ex machina* in a tale of young Angelenos needing to look at their lives. She called it “an earthquake romance”. He says it’s a “polyphonic love story with pop, jazz, gospel, blues and funk” and therefore a musical. I’d say that it was opera. As for the music, define it as hypnotic — romantic with a fine crashing atonal psychedelic earthquake in Act II. Slightly to my surprise, I loved it. **Box office: 020-8534 0310, to July 17**

**ert**  
**Ar-te Ensemble**  
**rs’ Hall, EC2**

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HER

**T**he world is still waiting for a global warming opera but in the meantime Miguel Azguime’s (*ThS*)inking *Survival Kit* comes pretty close. A bold commission from the City of London Festival, nodding both to this year’s Portuguese and biodiversity themes, Azguime’s music-theatre collage throws us headfirst into the ocean and, if we do emerge back on the earth, we certainly aren’t safe and dry.

Performed with ferocious panache by the Sond’ Ar-te Electric Ensemble, a group of acoustic instrumentalists and electronica, Azguime’s sound-world is as murky and all-consuming as the sea itself. A jumble sale of poetry, from Shakespeare and Joyce to Pessoa and Camões (no, nor me), was our raft, whether spat, hissed, croaked or, occasionally, sung at us, by Frances Lynch, clad in the classic avant-garde robe of white negligée and tuning fork.

The piece rarely bored, but it’s been a while since these Berio-like mash-ups of text and vocal effects have truly startled an audience. These old tricks and the uninspired video art — veering from happy honeybees to a purple vortex (think the Eye of Sauron from *The Lord of the Rings*) — obscured the strong essence of Azguime’s tough, tensile textures. A mixed bag from Portugal prefaced the premiere. I loved Luis Tinoco’s

heathaze-inspired *The Silence and the Stones*, which buzzed beguilingly towards its bony conclusion (each player switching their instrument for two stones) and used the electronics to best effect. But João Pedro Oliveira’s long marimba piece, *Liquid Bars*, spent far too much time chasing its own tail, and Flo Menezes’ *The Rustling of Leaves*, which apparently has something to do with “quantum claustrophobics”, frustrated all attempts at decoding.