

# The World's Wife

**Start time:** 7.30pm

**Approximate end time:** 9.10pm, with no interval

Please note all timings are approximate and subject to change.

## Programme

**Tom W Green** *The World's Wife*

**In *The World's Wife*, the poet Carol Ann Duffy explores history from a female perspective; Tom W Green's chamber opera brings her poetry vividly to life in a contemporary meditation on gender politics.**

Carol Ann Duffy's poetry collection *The World's Wife* (1999) is a unique response to the way that women have been pushed into the shadows of their menfolk over the centuries – in myth, fairy tales, the Bible and history itself. From the bitter ennui of Mrs Aesop to the insights of a very modern young girl in 'Little Red Cap' and the single-verse disgust with which Mrs Icarus watches her husband plunge to earth, the former Poet Laureate brings to well-known narratives new angles that are always fresh, sometimes funny and often furious.

Tom W Green's idea for this work was sparked when the leader of the Mavron Quartet asked him to create a substantial piece for the ensemble. He had previously written this all-female group a 10-minute quartet; now a longer span with the addition of a solo soprano offered greater possibilities. This combination is further extended through the use of loop pedals, a live electronic device that enables the singer to create the effect of a vocal ensemble, bringing back motifs or phrases in extra layers of sound as the music unfolds.

Looking for a suitable text, Green came across *The World's Wife* and was enchanted, both by the topical gender politics and by Duffy's use of language, metre and timbre. He was able to meet her backstage after a reading, introduced himself and in due course received her permission to set the poems, selecting 11 from the original 31, chiefly, though not exclusively, homing in on the fictional or mythical characters.

*The World's Wife* was conceived initially as a song-cycle, but soon spiralled into a fully stageable chamber opera. It was first produced by Welsh National Opera in 2017.

'It makes excellent theatre – a theatre of sound and words, certainly ... and all the better for a certain ambiguity of aim,' wrote *The Arts Desk's* critic Stephen Walsh. It was subsequently shortlisted for a BASCA award.

For this new production, Green has recast the opera for the dramatic baritone voice of Lucia Lucas, cutting a few verses and one whole scene ('Frau Freud') and adding an epilogue that homes in on insights from the performers. Five years on, refreshing the work for a trans baritone, Green says that he intends also to renew the work's intense relevance to gender politics of the moment, bringing today's preoccupations into focus.

All the musical substance is derived from works by women composers of different eras who were sidelined by the misogynistic attitudes of their day. They include Francesca Caccini and Barbara Strozzi of the Italian Baroque, the 19th-century Clara Schumann and the British 20th-century modernist Elisabeth Lutyens. Strozzi is a particular favourite of Green's, who praises her 'sense of line' as a powerful inspiration to him in general, not only here.

'I wanted to make a conscious point that there are other voices contributing,' Green comments. 'We're always standing on the shoulders of giants, and as composers, we always inhabit a musical space that others have opened up for us before. Just as the poems demonstrate that women have been erased from mythical and historical narratives, women have also been erased from compositional narratives, despite contributing enormous amounts.'

The opera opens with 'Little Red Cap' and her encounter with the Wolf, the tale reinvented for the present day: an inquisitive young woman is deflowered by a predatory older man and ultimately takes revenge.

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Next, Pilate's wife is haunted not only by her soft-handed husband, but by the man he is condemning to death on the cross. 'Mrs Aesop' is bored and exasperated by Mr Aesop's dull and clichéd fables. The extended, icy story of 'Queen Herod' is full of horror and fear for her own child; here, Green says, the music is built from material by Clara Schumann and Elisabeth Lutyens.

'Salome', shown as a drunken seductress, is a pointed contrast, followed by 'Mrs Icarus', the shortest and most sardonic poem. 'Medusa' is depicted as a wife tragically soured by jealousy over a philandering husband. 'Anne Hathaway', however, is the one moment when the possibility of love shines through. Widowed, she cherishes the memory of her husband William Shakespeare: 'Some nights, I dreamed he'd written me, the bed a page beneath his writer's hands.'

'Mrs Beast' delves towards the heart of the matter, evoking a cavalcade of fairy-tale figures in dire straits or, in the case of the Little Mermaid, fishnet tights. Now there builds the Wives' Choir, in which the singer's loops mingle into a self-generated, multivoiced ensemble.

The final 'wife' is liberated from all that has gone before, without reference to any male figure: 'Demeter' evokes the pure motherly love of the Greek goddess for her daughter – implicitly Persephone, returning from winter in the Underworld. Again, the loop device creates a suitably other-worldly effect.

The new version of the opera ends with an epilogue based on extracts of interviews with the performers themselves, bringing the story finally into the here and now.

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## Performers

### Ragazze Quartet

**Rosa Arnold** violin

**Jeanita Vriens-van Tongeren** violin

**Annemijn Bergkotte** viola

**Rebecca Wise** cello

**Lucia Lucas** baritone

**Tom W Green** composer

**Carol Ann Duffy** libretto

**Jorinde Keesmaat** director

**Sammy Van den Heuvel** scenography

**Sasja Strengolt** costumes

**Lalina Goddard** dramaturgy

**Radna Berendsen** make-up and hairstyling

**Tim van 't Hof, Rohan McDermott** lighting

**Koen Keevel** sound

**Kate Packham** production manager

**Daniel Whewell** technical manager

### **Little Red-Cap**

At childhood's end, the houses petered out  
into playing fields, the factory, allotments  
kept, like mistresses, by kneeling married men,  
the silent railway line, the hermit's caravan,  
till you came at last to the edge of the woods.  
It was there that I first clapped eyes on the  
wolf.

He stood in a clearing, reading his verse out  
loud  
in his wolfy drawl, a paperback in his hairy  
paw,  
red wine staining his bearded jaw. What big  
ears  
he had! What big eyes he had! What teeth!  
In the interval, I made quite sure he spotted  
me,  
sweet sixteen, never been, babe, waif, and  
bought me a drink,

my first. You might ask why. Here's why.  
Poetry.  
The wolf, I knew, would lead me deep into the  
woods,  
away from home, to a dark tangled thorny  
place  
lit by the eyes of owls. I crawled in his wake,  
my stockings ripped to shreds, scraps of red  
from my blazer  
snagged on twig and branch, murder clues.  
I lost both shoes

but got there, wolf's lair, better beware.  
Lesson one that night,  
breath of the wolf in my ear, was the love  
poem.  
I clung till dawn to his thrashing fur, for  
what little girl doesn't dearly love a wolf?  
Then I slid from between his heavy matted  
paws  
and went in search of a living bird – white  
dove –

which flew, straight, from my hands to his  
open mouth.  
One bite, dead. How nice, breakfast in bed,  
he said,  
licking his chops. As soon as he slept, I crept to  
the back  
of the lair, where a whole wall was crimson,  
gold, aglow with books.  
Words, words were truly alive on the tongue,  
in the head,  
warm, beating, frantic, winged; music and  
blood.

But then I was young – and it took ten years  
in the woods to tell that a mushroom  
stoppers the mouth of a buried corpse, that  
birds  
are the uttered thought of trees, that a  
greying wolf  
howls the same old song at the moon, year in,  
year out,  
season after season, same rhyme, same  
reason. I took an axe

to a willow to see how it wept. I took an axe to  
a salmon  
to see how it leapt. I took an axe to the wolf  
as he slept, one chop, scrotum to throat, and  
saw  
the glistening, virgin white of my  
grandmother's bones.  
I filled his old belly with stones. I stitched  
him up.  
Out of the forest I come with my flowers,  
singing, all alone.

### **Pilate's Wife**

Firstly, his hands – a woman's. Softer than  
mine,  
with pearly nails, like shells from Galilee.  
Indolent hands. Camp hands that clapped for  
grapes.  
Their pale, mothy touch made me flinch.  
Pontius.

I longed for Rome, home, someone else.  
When the Nazarene  
entered Jerusalem, my maid and I crept out,  
bored stiff, disguised, and joined the frenzied  
crowd.  
I tripped, clutched the bridle of an ass, looked  
up

and there he was. His face? Ugly. Talented.  
He looked at me. I mean he looked at me. My  
God.  
His eyes were eyes to die for. Then he was  
gone,  
his rough men shouldering a pathway to the  
gates.

The night before his trial, I dreamt of him.  
His brown hands touched me. Then it hurt.  
Then blood. I saw that each tough palm was  
skewered  
by a nail. I woke up, sweating, sexual,  
terrified.

Leave him alone. I sent a warning note, then  
quickly dressed.  
When I arrived, the Nazarene was crowned  
with thorns.  
The crowd was baying for Barabbas. Pilate  
saw me,  
looked away, then carefully turned up his  
sleeves

and slowly washed his useless, perfumed  
hands.  
They seized the prophet then and dragged  
him out,  
up to the Place of Skulls. My maid knows all  
the rest.  
Was he God? Of course not. Pilate believed  
he was.

### **Mrs Aesop**

By Christ, he could bore for Purgatory. He was small  
didn't prepossess. So he tried to impress.  
Dead men,  
Mrs Aesop, he'd say, tell no tales. Well, let me  
tell you now  
that the bird in his hand shat on his sleeve,  
never mind the two worth less in the bush.  
Tedious.

Going out was worst. He'd stand at our gate,  
look, then leap;  
scour the hedgerows for a shy mouse, the  
fields  
for a sly fox, the sky for one particular  
swallow  
that couldn't make a summer. The jackdaw,  
according to him,  
envied the eagle. Donkeys, would, on the  
whole, prefer to be lions.

On one appalling evening stroll, we passed  
an old hare  
snoozing in a ditch – he stopped and made a  
note – and then,  
about a mile further on, a tortoise,  
somebody's pet,  
creeping, slow as marriage, up the road. Slow  
but certain, Mrs Aesop, wins the race.  
Asshole.

What race? What sour grapes? What silk  
purse,  
sow's ear, dog in a manger, what big fish?  
Some days  
I could barely keep awake as the story  
droned on  
towards the moral of itself. Action, Mrs A,  
speaks louder  
than words. And that's another thing, the sex

was diabolical. I gave him a fable one night  
about a little cock that wouldn't crow, a razor-  
sharp axe  
with a heart blacker than the pot that called  
the kettle.  
I'll cut off your tail, all right, I said, to save my  
face.  
That shut him up. I laughed last, longest.

### **Queen Herod**

Ice in the trees.  
Three Queens at the Palace gates,  
dressed in furs, accented;  
their several sweating, panting beasts  
laden for a long hard trek,  
following the guide and boy to the stables;  
courteous, confident; oh, and with gifts  
for the King and Queen of here – Herod, me –  
in exchange for sunken baths, curtained beds,  
fruit, the best of meat and wine,  
dancers, music, talk –  
as it turned out to be,  
with everyone fast asleep, save me,  
those vivid three –  
till bitter dawn.

They were wise. Older than I.  
They knew what they knew.  
Once drunken Herod's head went back,  
they asked to see her,  
fast asleep in her crib,  
my little child.  
Silver and gold,  
the loose change of herself,  
glowed in the soft bowl of her face.  
Grace, said the tallest Queen.  
Strength, said the Queen with the hennaed  
hands.  
The black Queen  
made a tiny starfish of my daughter's fist,  
said Happiness; then stared at me,  
Queen to Queen, with insolent lust.

Watch, they said, for a star in the east –  
a new star  
pierced through the night like a nail.  
It means he's here, alive, newborn.  
Who? Him. The Husband. Hero. Hunk.  
The Boy Next Door. The Paramour. The  
Je t'adore.  
The Marrying Kind. Adulterer. Bigamist.  
The Wolf. The Rip. The Rake. The Rat.  
The Heartbreaker. The Ladykiller. Mr Right.

My baby stirred,  
suckled the empty air for milk,  
till I knelt  
and the black Queen scooped out my breast,  
the left, guiding it down  
to the infant's mouth.  
No man, I swore,  
will make her shed one tear.  
A peacock screamed outside.

Afterwards, it seemed like a dream.  
I saw the fierce eyes of the black Queen  
flash again, felt her urgent warnings scald  
my ear. Watch for a star, a star.  
It means he's here ...

Some swaggering lad to break her heart,  
some wincing Prince to take her name away  
and give a ring, a nothing, a nought in gold.  
I sent for the Chief of Staff,  
a mountain man  
with a red scar, like a tick  
to the mean stare of his eye.  
Take men and horses,  
knives, swords, cutlasses.  
Ride East from here  
and kill each mother's son.  
Do it. Spare not one.

The midnight hour. The chattering stars  
shivered in a nervous sky.  
Orion to the South  
who knew the score, who'd seen,  
not seen, then seen it all before;  
the yapping Dog Star at his heels.  
High up in the West  
a studded, diamond W.

And then, as prophesied,  
blatant, brazen, buoyant in the East –  
and blue –  
The Boyfriend's Star.

We do our best,  
we Queens, we mothers,  
mothers of Queens.

We wade through blood  
for our sleeping girls.  
We have daggers for eyes.

Behind our lullabies,  
the hooves of terrible horses  
thunder and drum.

#### 4.75

Ladies, Ladies, Ladies

#### Salome

I'd done it before (and doubtless I'll do it  
again, sooner or later)  
woke up with a head on the pillow beside me –  
whose? –  
what did it matter?

Good-looking, of course, dark hair, rather  
matted;  
the reddish beard several shades lighter;  
with very deep lines around the eyes,  
from pain, I'd guess, maybe laughter;  
and a beautiful crimson mouth that obviously  
knew  
how to flatter ...  
which I kissed ...  
Colder than pewter.  
Strange. What was his name? Peter?

Simon? Andrew? John? I knew I'd feel better  
for tea, dry toast, no butter,  
so rang for the maid.  
And, indeed, her innocent clatter  
of cups and plates,  
her clearing of clutter,  
her regional patter,  
were just what I needed –  
hangover and wrecked as I was from a night  
on the batter.

Never again!  
I needed to clean up my act,  
get fitter,  
cut out the booze and the fags and the sex.  
Yes. And as for the latter,  
it was time to turf out the blighter,  
the beater or biter,  
who'd come like a lamb to the slaughter  
to Salome's bed.

In the mirror, I saw my eyes glitter.  
I flung back the sticky red sheets,  
and there, like I said – and ain't life a bitch –  
was his head on a platter.

#### Mrs Icarus

I'm not the first or the last  
To stand on a hillock,  
Watching the man she married  
Prove to the world  
He's a total, utter, absolute, Grade A pillock.

#### Medusa

A suspicion, a doubt, a jealousy  
grew in my mind,  
which turned the hairs on my head to filthy  
snakes,  
as though my thoughts  
hissed and spat on my scalp.

My bride's breath soured, stank  
in the grey bags of my lungs.  
I'm foul mouthed now, foul tongued,  
yellow fanged.  
There are bullet tears in my eyes.  
Are you terrified?

Be terrified.  
It's you I love,  
perfect man, Greek God, my own;  
but I know you'll go, betray me, stray  
from home.  
So better by far for me if you were stone.

I glanced at a buzzing bee,  
a dull grey pebble fell  
to the ground.  
I glanced at a singing bird,  
a handful of dusty gravel  
spattered down.

I looked at a ginger cat,  
a housebrick  
shattered a bowl of milk.  
I looked at a snuffling pig,  
a boulder rolled  
in a heap of shit.

I stared in the mirror.  
Love gone bad  
showed me a Gorgon.  
I stared at a dragon.  
Fire spewed  
from the mouth of a mountain.

And here you come  
with a shield for a heart  
and a sword for a tongue  
and your girls, your girls.  
Wasn't I beautiful?  
Wasn't I fragrant and young?

Look at me now.  
Look at me now.  
Look

### **Anne Hathaway**

'Item I gyve unto my wife my second best bed ...'

(from Shakespeare's will)

The bed we loved in was a spinning world of forests, castles, torchlight, clifftops, seas where we would dive for pearls. My lover's words

were shooting stars which fell to earth as kisses

on these lips; my body now a softer rhyme to his, now echo, assonance; his touch a verb dancing in the centre of a noun.

Some nights, I dreamed he'd written me, the bed

a page beneath his writer's hands. Romance and drama played by touch, by scent, by taste.

In the other bed, the best, our guests dozed on, dribbling their prose. My living laughing love –

I hold him in the casket of my widow's head as he held me upon that next best bed.

### **Mrs Beast**

These myths going round, these legends, fairytales,

I'll put them straight; so when you stare

Into my face – Helen's face, Cleopatra's,

Queen of Sheba's, Juliet's – then, deeper,

Gaze into my eyes – Nefertiti's, Mona Lisa's,

Garbo's eyes - think again. The Little Mermaid slit

Her shining, silver tail in two, rubbed salt

Into that stinking wound, got up and walked,

In agony, in fishnet tights, stood up and smiled, waltzed,

All for a Prince, a pretty boy, a charming one

Who'd dump her in the end, chuck her, throw her overboard.

I could have told her – look, love, I should know,

They're bastards when they're Princes.

What you want to do is find yourself a beast.

The sex

Is better.

On my poker nights, the Beast

Kept out of sight. We were a hard school, tough as fuck,

All of us beautiful and rich – the Woman

Who Married a Minotaur, Goldilocks, the Bride

Of the Bearded Lesbian, Frau Yellow Dwarf,

et Moi.

I watched those wonderful women shuffle and deal –

Five and Seven Card Stud, Sidewinder, Hold

'Em, Draw –

I watched them bet and raise and call.

But behind each player stood a line of ghosts

Unable to win. Eve, Ashputtel. Marilyn

Monroe.

Rapunzel slashing wildly at her hair.

Bessie Smith unloved and down and out.

Bluebeard's wives, Henry VIII's, Snow White

Cursing the day she left the seven dwarfs,

Diana,

Princess of Wales. The sheepish Beast came in

With a tray of schnapps at the end of the

game

And we stood for the toast – Fay Wray –

Then tossed our fiery drinks to the back of our

crimson throats.

Bad girls. Serious ladies. Mourning our dead.

So I was hard on the Beast, win or lose,

When I got upstairs, those tragic girls in my head,

Turfing him out of bed; standing alone

On the balcony, the night so cold I could taste the stars

On the tip of my tongue. And I made a prayer –

Thumbing my pearls, the tears of Mary, one by one,

Like a rosary – words for the lost, the captive beautiful,

The wives, those less fortunate than we.

### **Wives Choir texts**

– Look at me now

– We do our best, we Queens, we mothers, mothers of Queens

– I'm not the first or the last

– Ladies, Ladies, Ladies

– Be terrified, it's you I love

The moon was a hand-mirror breathed on by a Queen.

My breath was a chiffon scarf for an elegant ghost.

I turned to go back inside. Bring me the Beast for the night.

Bring me the wine-cellar key. Let the less-loving one be me.

### **Demeter**

Where I lived – winter and hard earth.

I sat in my cold stone room

choosing tough words, granite, flint,

to break the ice. My broken heart –

I tried that, but it skimmed,

flat, over the frozen lake.

She came from a long, long way,

but I saw her at last, walking,

my daughter, my girl, across the fields,

in bare feet, bringing all spring's flowers

to her mother's house. I swear

the air softened and warmed as she moved,

the blue sky smiling, none too soon,

with the small shy mouth of a new moon.

Carol Ann Duffy (born 1955)

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