

Reviews

It's just all too cosy

COSI FAN TUTTE ★

Royal Opera House

Tom Sutcliffe

A FEW years back, I suggested that the Royal Opera should auction the franchise of costuming Jonathan Miller's simple production of *Così* — originally furnished with Armani outfits. Now, the frocks and suits are by Paul Smith, Ralph Lauren, Donna Karan and Cerruti, but there's no price announced for the privilege.

None of these clothes does much for me — or for the cast who look smartish but undistinguished. Fortunately, they don't sound as anonymous as their trouser suits look. There's some lovely singing. Soile Isokoski, as Fiordiligi, has the kind of dreamy, creamy perfectly poised top that one can't hear too much of. She pours it out with apparently effortless accuracy and fluency — even more impressive than in 1997 at the Shaftesbury.

The bottom of the voice isn't so great. Hence, her second act *Per pietà* pleases more than *Come scoglio*. Helene Schneiderman's Dorabella is deliciously, and not too blatantly, naughty, and sounds appealingly ripe, though inclined to push down on the

notes. Baritone Dalibor Jenis, from Slovakia, makes a very promising debut as a quite passionate, robust and believable Guglielmo, while Kenneth Tarver sounds his usual, elegant, sweet lyric tenor self as Ferrando, which is not really ideal — as Ferrando should have a bit more cutting edge and excitement.

Nuccia Focile's very useful but not too arch Despina makes a credible team with Thomas Allen's accomplished Alfonso, almost surprising himself at the degree of beastly cynicism he displays.

Was Colin Davis being almost too laid-back as conductor? The playing was beautiful.

The problem with Miller's staging is excessive self-consciousness and artificiality. The story is a hard-to-accept theatrical game, but it's fundamentally about real feelings.

Miller wants to focus more penetratingly on the characters by neutralising the environment to little more than a plain plaster wall. With the performers always so close to the front of the stage, the production becomes a display



Robbie Jack

Fun and jokes: Dalibor Jenis (Guglielmo) and Kenneth Tarver (Ferrando)

case for individual performances. However, they must bring the tale alive rather than just play up all the jokes and fun without pain or passion. Somehow Davis and this

cast make the emotional ambivalence too comfortably digestible.

● Until 30 November. Box office: 020 7304 4000.

Saying it modestly with soul

SHAUN ESCOFFERY ★

Borderline, W1

Max Bell

THE local soul posses were out in force for highly touted new singer Shaun Escoffery. The grapevine has been buzzing with the word on this East Londoner ever since DJ Trevor Nelson got on his case. That endorsement wasn't entirely part of some pal's pact either, even though Escoffery is managed by another singer, Paul Johnson.

Following a lusty introduction from Mica Paris, Escoffery arrived in a fog of dry ice while his band pushed their bass heavy amplification to the limit. The entrance was grander than the artist's more modest

approach. Unlike the R&B and nu school hip hop, represented by tough-talking So Solid Crew, Escoffery is an old-school sort, what you might call a closet romantic.

As a singer, he recalls Seal on occasion with a whiff of Roland Gift about his baritone. Stylistically, Escoffery aims for the more

ambient side of Brit soul and made full use of cello, funky bass lines, dashes of keyboard and a female drummer, a fact only worth remarking upon because this area is such a macho domain.

Songs like *Into The Blue* and *Hurts Too Good* showed he had a fair range of emotion to cross. Although he didn't say much, Escoffery cut a dash in his black leather pants, so he got the ladies on-side without too much trouble.

Given a bit less volume and a bit more room to work in, he shows every sign of living up to his build-up.

Who, however, did discover oxygen? One scientist on the committee declares: "We're always in a race where being first counts for everything." Therefore, a piece of historical detective work develops, which puts the claims of 18th century scientists Antoine Lavoisier, Joseph Priestley, and Carl Wilhelm Scheele under the microscope.

From the opening sauna scene, Djerassi and Hoffman emphasise the importance of the scientists' wives. The playwrights' feminism is very welcome, if rather heavy-handed. The science is far more deftly presented. Even though the human element is too neat to convince entirely, the oxygen masque, and the staged scientific experiments are ravishing. A satisfyingly spicy scientific number.

● Until 1 December. Box office: 020 8237 1111.

Ratings: ○ adequate, ★ good, ★★ very good, ★★★ outstanding, X poor



Closet romantic: Shaun Escoffery

New classics caught on camera

EVER since photography emerged painters have feared it, sensing in its ability to capture the world immediately the basis for an adequate and practical substitute for the messy and time-consuming process of applying paint to canvas. Such fears were well founded, for the debate about whether photography is art died, in practical terms, long ago, arguably to the detriment of painting. Such claims, however, are strengthened by shows like this, which brings together a number of credible inheritors to mantles of the landscape, history and portrait painters of old.

Locations briefly touched by history and long since ignored form the subject for Tomoko Yoneda's photographs. An unremarkable courtroom

PAINTERLY PHOTOGRAPHY ★

Blains Fine Art, W1

Nick Hackworth

assumes a new poignancy on learning it was used during the Nuremberg trials and its emptiness apes you into conjuring up ghosts of the guilty and dead. A deserted playing field transpires to be the take-off point for the last kamikaze mission of the Second World War, its current ordinariness almost an insult to the drama it once played host to.

Portraiture of an alternative kind is practised by Christopher Bucklow. On large

cibachromes the silhouettes of models, filled in by myriad points of light, appear against fields of subtly varying colour. The light but attractive images are billed as personifications of the artist's own internal drives, which is interesting as most of the models appear to be attractive young women.

Hiroshi Sugimoto's series of lithographs, *In Praise of Shadows*, meanwhile, render the moving still, being based on long exposures of burning candles. Simple, unpretentious and aesthetic, Sugimoto's images represent the best qualities of photography and prove that some photographers, at least, deserve their status as artists.

● Until 8 December. 23 Bruton Street, W1. Tel: 020 7495 5050.

LAST WEEK'S OPENINGS — WHAT THE CRITICS SAID

KEY ☺ Good ☹ OK ☹ Awful — No review

FILM	Evening Standard	Daily Mail	The Times	Daily Telegraph	The Guardian	The Independent	Financial Times	Daily Express	Sunday Times	Sunday Telegraph	The Observer	Independent on Sunday
Harry Potter and the Philosopher's Stone	☺	☺	☺	☺	☺	☺	☺	☺	—	☺	☺	☺
Kandahar	☺	—	☺	☺	☺	☺	☺	—	☺	☺	☺	☺
Ghost World	☺	—	☺	☺	☺	☺	☺	☺	☺	☺	☺	☺
Disco Pigs	☹	—	☺	☺	☺	☺	☺	☺	☺	☺	☺	☺
My Brother Tom	☹	—	☺	☺	☺	☺	☺	☺	☺	☺	☺	☺
THEATRE												
Dangerous Corner	☺	☺	☺	☺	☺	☺	☺	☺	☺	☺	☺	☺
Alice in Wonderland	☺	☺	☺	☺	☺	☺	—	☺	☺	☺	☺	☺