

Bel canto at its best

THEATRE

Norma
Opera Holland Park
Nick Kimberley

LONDON is not short of opera, as the soon-to-depart Savoy Opera found to its cost, but since 1996 Opera Holland Park (OHP) has carved out its own summertime niche, building on four decades of municipally funded music in said park.

This is its most enticing season yet, with one of the greatest of all operas (Mozart's *Marriage of Figaro*), some fluff (*Die Fledermaus*), more or less rare Verdi (*Luisa Miller*) and Puccini (*La Fanciulla del West*) and *La Bohème* — as close to guaranteed box office as opera gets (which is never very close).

The real coup, however, is the season's opener. The soprano Nelly Miricioiu may not be at the very peak of her career, but she remains one of the finest exponents of Italian bel canto of the past 20 years.

As she demonstrates in the title role of Bellini's *Norma*, she finds natural poetry where most singers find only inordinate decoration.

Moments of thin tone and laboured breathing are a small price to pay for the intensity of expression, and for the control of dynamics, so refined as to have you on the edge of your seat for fear of missing a syllable.

Miricioiu has the ideal

counterbalance in the Adalgisa of Diana Montague. The plot casts them as rivals for the same man (Don Bernardini's rather weedy Pollione), but since Montague is a light and agile mezzo and Miricioiu a luxuriously dark soprano, their voices all but merge so that they become something akin to sisters under the skin: an inspired casting match.

In the tricky, semi-open air acoustic, conductor Brad Cohen and the City of London Sinfonia offer solid support.

If only the same could be said of the production. The proscenium-free theatre that OHP builds every year cries out for a production that makes creative use of what is a unique space.

Instead, Mike Ashman's staging mimics the modes and manners of opera house convention, with synchronised milling from the chorus and four-square blocking for the principals.

There is an attempt to update the action, so that Bellini's Druids become a religious minority oppressed by a gun-toting occupying power, yet it feels half-hearted.

Costumes are by textile designers Charles and Patricia Lester, but they remain textile designs, not costumes.

Perhaps Miricioiu is too regal a singer to submit to a properly demanding production, but it all seems too flimsy to support her magisterial performance.

● *In repertory until 25 June.*
Information: 0845 230 9769.



Rivals in love, but an ideal operatic pairing: Nelly Miricioiu as Norma and Diana Montague as Adalgisa

City of Angels captured in a riot of colour



Vibrant: Household gloss on canvas

AMERICAN artist Sarah Morris, now in her mid-thirties, has spent her energies on presenting something of the essential qualities of those bastions of capitalist modernity: the hyper-real cities of the US.

Previous subjects have included New York, Washington and Miami. Her new work, comprising a 25-minute film and a series of related abstract paintings, targets LA.

The film and paintings both obliquely depict power structures: the physical,

EXHIBITION

**Sarah Morris/
Los Angeles**

White Cube, N1

Nick Hackworth

manifest in concrete, steel and glass, and the social, manifest in relationships with "the right people".

The film collages footage of the famous with images of LA's architectural environment, alongside more quotidian scenes. We move from Dennis Hopper

driving, to paparazzi besieging the Kodak Theatre during the Oscars, to Mulholland Drive, to shots of a waiter at work.

The piece works by building up an almost subconscious awareness of the atmosphere of this surreal place that has such an impact upon the world. That atmosphere is concentrated in the paintings, which resemble structural drawings run riot, Mondrians on speed.

The bright household gloss in which the works

are executed lends the pieces a vibrant energy in keeping with LA's character, but which sits at odds with the mildly sinister geometric patterns that make up the paintings' composition.

That threat becomes explicit in Universal (whose title refers to media company Universal) in which verticals dominate the canvas, defining a structure that takes little account of human scale.

● *Until 10 July.*
Information: 020 7749 7476.

Impressive choir ranges from Verdi to samba

THE London Gay Men's Chorus must mean high camp and torch song sentimentality, right? Right. But judging from this slickly presented concert, labelled "eclectic", it means much besides. Musical Director Charlie Beale, who shared conducting duties with Simon Sharp, is a hugely accomplished musician. Immediately his 100 singers — all amateurs — began Verdi's Chorus of the Hebrew

Slaves it was clear that they share his consummately professional attitude.

Verdi was followed by some ambitious music: Sir John Tavener's (woodenly phrased) *Funeral Ikos*, Samuel Barber's rapt *Sure on this Shining Night*, three penetratingly pertinent spirituals, *Steal Away, Go Down Moses* (in Tippett's version) and the contemporary *Would you harbour me* (by Ysaye

CLASSICAL

The London Gay Men's Chorus/ecclisias
Queen Elizabeth Hall

Stephen Pettitt

Barnwell). There was also the notable British premiere of Jan Sandström's haunting study in texture, *The Singing Apes of Khao Yai* — the only piece not sung from memory. And LGMC's performance of

the blues *You Gotta Move* included an extraordinary spine-tingling episode when the choir processed in a great ring around the audience, improvising an exultantly chaotic reprise of songs that had gone before.

The second half included songs by Bob Dylan, Norah Jones and Jim Pepper, with soloists plucked from the ranks, and opened and closed with numbers — *Mais Que Nada*, the Brazilian football

team's song for the 2002 World Cup, and Jon and Vangelis's disco classic *State of Independence* — that came complete with Carnival Collective's deafening samba band. Not this writer's usual meat and drink. But the exuberance, expertise, team spirit and sheer hard work made one truly proud to be gay. Fine contributions, too, from the jazz players, especially saxophonist Carlos Lopez-Real.

IN LONDON TONIGHT

BY RICHARD GODWIN

Plan your evening's entertainment with our guide to the best films, shows, gigs and one-off events that are still taking bookings (at the time of going to press).

PICK OF THE NIGHT

Swan Lake

Royal Albert Hall, Kensington Gore, SW7. £19-£49.50. Tube: South Kensington
The Bolshoi-trained, Berlin-based Polina Semanova makes her London debut in the English National Ballet's rendition of Tchaikovsky's classic. Her unconventional talent and cover-girl looks make her a hugely exciting prospect.
020 7838 3100

FOR ONE NIGHT ONLY

Penny Lancaster in Tonight's the Night

7.30pm, Victoria Palace, Victoria Street, SW1. £23-£55. Tube: Victoria
Rod Stewart's squeeze makes a cameo appearance in a VIP charity performance of his musical.
020 7834 1317

LAST CHANCE TO SEE

Floetry

7pm, Jazz Café, 5 Parkway, NW1. £20. Tube: Camden Town
Natalie Stewart and Marsha Ambrosia, pictured, form Floetry, Brit School graduates who have made their name on the thriving Philadelphia nu-soul scene. They finish a week-long residency here.
020 7916 6060



CHEAP DEAL

Days of Heaven and The Thin Red Line

7pm and 8.45pm, Riverside Studios Cinema, Crisp Road, W6. £5.50, £4.50 concs. Tube: Hammersmith
This excellent double bill showcases two of director Terrence Malick's finest: *Days of Heaven* boasts unforgettable imagery, while *The Thin Red Line* remains one of the most powerful anti-war films.
020 8237 1111

IN THE PARTY MOOD

Nag Nag Nag

10.30pm-3am, The Ghetto, Falconberg Court, W1. £5, £3 concs. Tube: Tottenham Court Road
One of the most flamboyant club nights in town, with JoJo de Freq and Johnny Slut spinning electro.
020 7287 3726

OPEN YOUR MIND

Anthony Minghella

8pm, King's Head, 115 Upper Street, N1. £17.50, £12.50 concs. Tube: Highbury & Islington, Angel
The writer and director gives a talk after a double bill of his two plays — *Cigarettes & Chocolate* follows the terminally frustrated Gemma around her north London flat, while *Hang Up* charts the end of a love affair through a gut-wrenching telephone conversation.
020 7226 1916

To get your event listed, please email details to richard.godwin@standard.co.uk