

The Arts

Triumph of a fallen temptress

OPERA

Lulu

English National Opera

Fiona Maddocks

AFTER head-on crashes and a few near misses, English National Opera has a triumph. Earlier this week ENO's general director Nicholas Payne promised "crowd pullers" next season to boost box-office returns (last year's deficit was £271,000) and raise the morale of regular supporters. Who would have thought Berg's uncompromising portrayal of seedy Viennese eroticism would do the job ahead of schedule?

You can bend and shape Lulu any way you want. Temptress, whore, hussy or fallen woman, she's all things and nothing. Berg's opera, based on Wedekind's acid play, is open to an infinite variety of interpretations. Richard Jones, driven to ask awkward questions on stage, seemed bound to opt for the unthinkable. Never a cosy director, his current Midsummer Night's Dream for RSC attracted widespread contempt, just as his Hansel and Gretel for Welsh National Opera won universal acclaim. His startling, cartoonish Ring for the Royal Opera House still causes violent disagreement.

His Lulu, by contrast, is astonishingly lucid, unfussy and yes, straightforward — which means for the first time it makes sense. Clarity is helped by Paul Steinberg's bright, lurid sets (inventively lit by Pat Collins), a swiftly changing compendium of Jeff Koons styles via a jungle tableau with life-sized crocodile plus various furry bunnies, plastic poodles and polar bear rug. Buki Shiff's costumes offer a bonanza of catwalk variety with Lulu dressed anew each scene, from spangly Theda Bara lookalike to Texan lonestar cowgirl and baby-doll sex kitten. The total effect suggests theme rooms in an Old Vienna motel.

This was the Coliseum's first staging of the opera, using Richard Stokes's bold, largely audible, new translation. The fine cast, improving conspicuously as the evening progressed, were all singing their (often multiple) roles for the first time. As Lulu, the America soprano Lisa Saffer, whose light, agile voice is equally suited to early music, tackled the challenging coloratura writing with an effortless, silvery ease. She can act, too, and looked stunning in her panoply of shiny blonde and brunette wigs. Robert Hayward's Dr Schön had solidity and menace, brilliantly offset by Robert Poulton's foxy Animal Tamer/Acrobat and Gwynne Howell's bumbling Schigolch. Susan Parry shone in the small but crucial role of the



Alastair Muir

Two predators: Berg's man-eater Lulu, played by Lisa Saffer, takes a brief respite from her destructive activities on a stuffed crocodile

lesbian Countess Geschwitz. John Graham-Hall was outstanding as Alwa.

The work is performed with the third act, incomplete at the time of Berg's death in 1935, finished (with much opposition by the Berg estate) by the Austrian composer Friedrich Cerha in 1974. At more than three hours, this

makes for a long evening but at least means Lulu gets redemptively done in by Jack the Ripper. The score shows Berg at his most radiant and his most eclectic: 12-tone techniques are washed in the elusive colours of waltz, ragtime and jazz, the rich orchestral sound intensified by saxophones and jazz

percussion. As with the singers, the ENO orchestra, conducted by Paul Daniel, grew in strength and intensity with each act. Each orchestral interlude was more impassioned than the last.

"I'll fight for women's rights," the Countess promises, shortly before her

death in the final moments. Someone has to. Lulu is no advertisement for womanhood. But this production, as intelligent as you'll find, puts a forceful case for ENO, not a moment too soon.

● Until 30 May. Box office: 020 7632 8300.

Sculptures in good standing

EXHIBITION

The Upright Figure

Tate Modern

Nick Hackworth

BETWEEN showing five new installations, the Tate will be filling its massive Turbine Hall with works from its permanent collection. The Upright Figure is the first of these exhibitions. Seventeen life-sized sculptures of the upright human form are divided into three groups, with an additional related display of three pieces by Henry Moore on the balcony area above.

The exhibition is a good deal better than any of the commissioned installations have been. It spans a century, including classically realist, semi-abstract and almost totally abstract attempts to capture the human form. And it suggests that, despite the 20th century assault on figuration, the human form is not an exhausted subject.

In the first group stand five figurative sculptures from between the late 1890s and the early 1920s. They include Renoir's curvy

Venus Victorious, holding out the apple that Paris has given her for winning his beauty contest.

By the time we reach the second group (mostly from the 1940s and 1950s), the formal lessons of modernism and the atrocities of the Second World War have made their mark.

A headless and armless Giacometti shares the space with pieces by Barbara Hepworth, William Turnball and Reg Butler. Butler's Woman, made of welded steel, resembles a relic from the Bronze Age, the only immediately recognisable feature being a fierce, lidless eye.

The final grouping includes Leonard McComb's Portrait of a Young Man Standing, a vital image of mankind, with its upward gaze and shining skin expressing defiance of the Cold War. Behind it stands one of Antony Gormley's lead casts of his own body, with feet planted shoulder-width apart and hands outstretched in a gesture of surprise — or possibly worship.

● Until August. Information: 020 7887 8008.



Curvy winner: Renoir's Venus Victorious at Tate Modern

Torch songs shed light on Kurtág

CLASSICAL

Valdine Anderson/
Joanna MacGregor

Queen Elizabeth Hall

Nick Kimberley

SINCE the Hungarian composer Gyorgy Kurtág hardly ever gives interviews, there are few quotes to illuminate his work; but there is one that reveals quite a lot: "My mother tongue is Bartók, and Bartók's mother tongue was Beethoven." A lineage of three composers, three gifted pianists, each placing the piano at the centre of their work. Put them together and you have a typical Joanna MacGregor programme.

In fact, this concert in the South Bank's Kurtág season wasn't MacGregor's alone; she wasn't heard at all in the first Kurtág work, Scenes from a Novel. In 15 doleful songs lasting barely 20 minutes, a woman scratches the scars of a broken relationship, until a plaintive descending figure from double-bass (Enno Sanft) pushes her towards ultimate release.

The soprano Valdine Anderson displayed an utterly natural sensuality in music that can easily sound overwrought, receiving delightful support from violin, double-bass and

cimbalom. Clio Gould's fiddle had the necessary folkish lilt, and Christopher Bradley's cimbalom chimed glassily, sometimes echoing the voice, sometimes grating against it.

Anderson returned for Kurtág's equally epigrammatic Requiem for the Beloved. Here, MacGregor accompanied, making the piano sound uncannily cimbalom-like, while Anderson really chewed on the poems' Russian consonants. They shared a sense of rhythm sufficiently relaxed to make these miniatures into modernist torch songs.

Earlier, MacGregor took us through wholehearted performances of Bartók's solo piano music, proving flexible enough for the jazzy inflections of Six Dances in Bulgarian Rhythm; and muscular enough for the tumultuous Piano Sonata: indeed, at times a little more delicacy might not have gone amiss. She opened the evening with Beethoven's final piano sonata, which, like the Bartók, requires formidable attack, duly delivered; but in quieter passages, her eagerness to linger occasionally robbed the music of momentum. Beethoven is not really her home turf.

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