

Airs on a shoestring

LIKE football, opera needs a flourishing network of youth schemes to feed new players into the system. British Youth Opera (BYO) was set up in 1987 to give young singers experience of full-scale production: not only the technical singing skills, but the stagecraft without which opera is merely a concert in costume.

BYO runs on a shoestring, and without wishing hardship on the company, that is probably how it should be. The point is to nurture singers, not cosset them with lavish sets and fancy costumes. Now BYO has teamed up with Southbank Sinfonia, an orchestra with a complementary philosophy, and this staging of Handel's *Semele* suggests that the collaboration has a solid foundation.

Semele is not quite full-on opera (Handel described it as being "In the manner of an Oratorio"), and has a more fluid structure than we are used to in Handelian opera seria. Part comedy, part tragedy, it probes the mismatch of ideals between gods and humans. Although Annilese Miskimmon's production is too busy, its hypermobile false proscenium pushing the singers too far upstage, it has some nice touches: a mirror scene straight out of the Marx Brothers is not only funny, but also to the point.

Even if it does not disguise moments

OPERA

Semele

Queen Elizabeth Hall

Nick Kimberley

of vocal tension or wonky orchestral intonation, Christian Curnyn's direction generates a real sense of ensemble, essential in a work that demands a large cast and an ample chorus. While nobody immediately makes you think you are watching tomorrow's stars today, there are convincing performances from singers who clearly enjoy how they look in Nicky Shaw's costumes, which roam from late-Edwardian to mid-1940s.

As *Semele*, Elizabeth Watts rather overplays the pathos, but consistently finds the drama implicit in the vocal line, and Ed Lyon's Jupiter has clean tenor ardour, even though the character is a dirty cad. Both are outshone by the Juno of Anna Stéphany, a blend of coloratura fireworks and slow-burning intensity.

Best of all, everyone delivers William Congreve's text with a clarity that eludes many far more experienced singers. BYO is obviously getting the basics right.

● *Tomorrow and Saturday.*
Information: 0870 382 8000.



Dress sense: 27 headless dolls by Turner Prize nominee Yinka Shonibare, an allusion to musician Fela Kuti and his wives

Courtesy of the artist and Stephen Friedman Gallery

Tribute to an African hero

THE Nigerian musician and political activist Fela Kuti was a legend. "Music is the weapon," he said. From the Seventies, when he found a rhythm developing his Afrobeat style, which fused jazz and African traditions, until 1997, when he died from an Aids-related illness, Fela took his weapon around the world.

He travelled widely, preaching his agit prop-cum-hippyish gospel of spiritual liberation, pan-African unity and resistance to political repression. In his idle moments he found time to aggravate numerous African despots, stand for the Nigerian presidency (hence his self-description as Black President) and, on one memorable occasion, in Lagos in 1978, marry 27 women simultaneously.

The Barbican is the location for a music, film and art festival celebrating Fela's life and legacy. At the core of the festival is an exhibition that brings together

EXHIBITION

Black President: The Art and Legacy of Fela Anikulapo-Kuti

Barbican Curve, EC1

Nick Hackworth

more than 30 international artists, many of whom were Kuti fans and some of whom knew and worked with him.

Inevitably the show is mixed in style, content and quality. Several artists have produced rather laboured political works, such as the Nigerian artist Odili Donald Odita, who has parked a wheelbarrow full of Nigerian banknotes in a simulated puddle of oil to bland and obvious effect.

Others are dismal in more individual ways. Yinka Shonibare, nominated for this year's Turner Prize, has clothed 27 headless

dolls with his motif African textiles and placed them on a huge wooden table, in a strange tribute to Fela's 27 wives.

Overall, however, the show is engaging and entertaining, managing hectically to communicate something of the vibrancy of its subject. The Kenyan-born painter Wangechi Mutu contributes an engagingly odd portrait of Fela's mother; a famous feminist, decapitating a phallic serpent in a psychedelic, disco-influenced landscape.

RCA graduate Senam Okudzeto presents an amusing and tongue-in-cheek video piece, *The Dialectic Jubilation: Afro-Funk Lessons*.

Most interesting are the pieces directly related to Fela, in particular the original album covers and related drawings by Ghariokwu Lemi which unpretentiously capture the spirit and music of the man.

● *Until 24 October.*
Information: 0845 120 7550.

New talents take their chance

YOU'VE probably never heard of Dekkor Records (neither had I), but they've got the right idea. With new labels sprouting like mushrooms, it makes sense to hire a club and put your artists straight into the shop window. Last night's three very different singers seized their chance with aplomb.

Easiest to define was Atila Huseyin, a young Turkish-Cypriot crooner of Sinatra stripe. Very relaxed and an unadulterated Frankophile right down to his black, patent-leather hair and snap-brim trilby, he sang enviably smoothly but his Bobby Darin-like

JAZZ

Dekkor Records Showcase

Pizza Express Jazz Club, W1

Jack Massarik

version of Mack the Knife lacked power.

Nina Clark, just back from a gap-year in Chicago, was more complex. She, too, lacked fire and was excessively statuesque, but after a hesitant start, she moved from guitar to piano with self-

penned songs (You're Too Sweet for This Place, Who Shall I Be?) of real merit. On faster numbers like *Twisted*, Annie Ross's old tongue-twister, her diction was mumbly but her all-round talent, particularly as a songwriter, was obvious.

The beefy baritone of David Migden rounded things off with convincingly pain-filled songs by John Martyn — "Scotland's greatest export after Johnnie Walker and Mel Gibson" — and Kelly-Joe Phelps. He'll do fine on the country-blues circuit.

● *Continues tonight.*
Information: 020 7439 8722.

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