

Shout & Streetwise: Opera in London

CUBE Circuit (Fall 2007)

By Janice Misurell-Mitchell

This summer while in London I attended a most unusual theatrical concert, created by composer Orlando Gough of the vocal ensemble Shout and members of Streetwise Opera, an ensemble of homeless and formerly homeless people. The result was "*Critical Mass*", a performance event that used spoken texts on social and political issues intertwined with folk songs, resistance songs, and children's songs from around the world. The venue was the Almeida Theatre, known for its cutting edge performances.

An ensemble of about sixty people appeared onstage, dressed in tailored outfits that were reminiscent of business suits, carrying briefcases and taking their places in a choral arrangement, sitting on wooden stools and boxes. The briefcases also were used as sound sources, being rapped on and slammed onto surfaces, while other non-vocal sound sources included clapping, stomping and shuffling. Vocally the group was very mixed—styles included operatic, the musical, gospel, folk and spoken word, and there was a wide range of texture, from solo, to small ensemble, to choral. Highly synchronized movement was used to dramatize various texts, and players assumed a variety of roles, from being supported by the group to being ostracized.

The "libretto" included spoken texts on social and political issues, usually from liberal politicians, writers such as George Orwell, and a scattering from talk shows and from demagogues such as Adolph Hitler. The sung texts were generally either folksongs that the singers had remembered from childhood, or labor and resistance songs sung during the first half of the twentieth century; texts were in their original languages, and Orlando Gough made a cappella arrangements of them.

The program describes the performance in the following manner: "*Critical Mass* is about the emotional, playful, and subversive power of folk songs and the seductive music of political rhetoric. It is also about the individual within the crowd, getting swept away, getting whipped up, standing out, standing up,...fighting apathy, fighting to be heard, longing and belonging."

Some of the songs presented were "Take this Hammer", the African American work song; "Bella Ciao", an Italian partisan song from the second World War; "Vai Dudole", a Bulgarian song about the crops needing rain. There were many quotes from politicians about war, particularly about the war in Iraq, and one of the most heavily ironic songs was the famous "... there are known knowns...there are known unknowns...", etc. from former Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld, performed in the most somber canon, with the singers snaking slowly around the stage. As you might expect, this received a lot of applause.

Notes from the program on the performing ensembles—

"The Shout was formed in 1998 by the composers Orlando Gough and Richard Chew. The singers come from very varied backgrounds—gospel, jazz, blues, contemporary classical, opera, early music—and include several accomplished improvisers. It has been called a 'vocal big band', a 'club choir', a 'vocal Stomp', a 'dangerous choir', a 'choir of Babel', a 'choral phenomenon'. It is, we hope, all of these things."

“In just five years Streetwise has grown into a national charity with bases across the country and in Boston, USA working with 600 people who have experienced homelessness per year. We work in parallel with homeless agencies with a vision that arts interventions can and should be an integral part of the overall support of people who have experienced homelessness. We do this by running two programmes: a Workshop Programme...involving regular singing/acting sessions in homeless centres of all musical styles, performances, theatre trips, and work placements in arts organizations; and annual productions which give our performers the chance to star alongside some of the top professionals in the field.” A “Bravo!” from this CUBEist for an exciting and moving performance.