

## Donizetti – *Maria di Rudenz*



**G**othic Opera has been brightening up the London scene with stuff that nobody else would dream of doing (or dare to) for five years now, and it comes up with a new treat each Halloween. This year's was Donizetti's *Maria di Rudenz*, in the atmospheric, vaulted and distressed Grand Hall of Battersea Arts Centre, with dry ice billowing and red light suffusing everything with a bloody glow. The story is a distant offshoot from Matthew Lewis' novel (as is Gounod's *The Bloody Nun*, which they did a couple of years ago), distilled and condensed to the

most fundamental elements in a short, punchy, brilliantly grim opera.

The personnages are barely human at all, instead really the purest expression of tormented emotion – this is what Donizetti does better than anyone, at least before *Trovatore*. Romantic opera takes it as read that the worst possible thing, the sin against the Holy Ghost, is the betrayal of love, and here we have the purest possible representation of that. Nothing really has to happen except two or more of these ‘victims of life’ standing pouring out their pain and love and hatred at each other. And that is exactly what happens, the stage echoing the Victorian father-and-daughter portrait on the wall in its static concentration.

Maria, cast off and abandoned for dead by lover Corrado, has secretly returned home (somewhere Alpine and medieval) to find him courting her cousin Mathilde – as is his brother Enrico. Specialising in surprise appearances at piquant moments, Maria (generally supposed to be dead, of course) keeps jumping out when everyone least expects it, full of scorn, curses and (yes!) love. Corrado is as honeyed and conflicted as the Conte di Luna. Solos and duets lead to fabulously layered ensembles of ultimate emotional turmoil. Maria kills Mathilde, Corrado stabs Maria (she survives again, to commit suicide later in Tristan style, ripping open her wound), and his brother too.

Director Lysanne van Overbeek correctly let the music do the talking, helped by a soprano (Daniella Sicari) who knows how to stand still and sing, and has a hard stare (much used) to rival Paddington's. There was a real frisson of *terribilità* about this Maria, matched by a laser tone that made you feel a bit sorry for old Corrado. Theo Perry made him as sympathetic as possible with nicely-phrased, warm-toned singing, and James Beddoe was an Enrico constantly on the cusp of emotional meltdown. Anna Castro Grinstein conducted with lovely sensitivity and pacing the admirable

band of six, which gave us yodelling  
Alpine tunes amid the tremolos and  
horror. In a way, the purest operatic  
experience I've had for a while.



Robert Thicknesse

*OperaNow*