

Round-up London Fringe

The British opera scene often feels like a tiny pond full of over-familiar fish doing autistically repetitive things, but occasionally it spawns something unexpected. *L'ospedale* was such a creature – an anonymous 17th-century opera, perhaps by Giovanni Felice Sances, rather more polyphonic than his contemporaries and with an easy melodic strain that to my ear prefigured Agostino Steffani. This was performed with considerable vim by **Solomon's Knot**, which styles itself a 'Baroque collective', at Wilton's Music Hall. The piece is a jaunty bit of jaded, pseudo-philosophical knockabout about four hospital patients waiting for the doctor. It turns out their complaints are not all that clinically treatable – broken heart, poverty, madness, you know the kind of thing – and concludes that money is the best (or possibly only) medicine.

Trying to shoehorn this bit of jovial cynicism into an earnest anti-Tory diatribe was always going to be a stretch, but perhaps director James Hurley is going through that tough stage of trying to be *un homme sérieux*. Yet though the staging was a bit harum-scarum and not very cogent, rather defused the piece's comedy and was a tragic waste of the brilliant Wilton's space and atmosphere, the musical performance was entirely admirable, starting with James Halliday's band. This happy group (viols, lute, guitar, harpsichords) had real verve – the seeds of something refreshing and different in what has quietly become rather a samey Early Music scene in this country.

All of this was terrifically well performed by singers (Lucy Page, Rebecca Moon, Thomas Herford, Michal Czerniawski, Jonathan Sells and Nicholas Merryweather)

charging about the in-the-round space, and chucking in a couple of unaccompanied Gesualdo madrigals just to show what they could do. This was perfect intonation and ensemble – and then each got a long, lovely flowing arioso over wandering basslines, to tell their stories. This was a really worthwhile piece: it would be good to see it performed a bit less frantically.

Max Frisch's 1953 play *Biedermann and the Arsonists* is precisely the sort of play people go to the opera to get away from, but which theatre types find endlessly fascinating: a dated, manic, absurdist Euro-comedy; a string of juvenile clichés saying trite things in a wearisomely bouncy way. People read all kinds of things into the text

▼ Harum-scarum and full of vim: Solomon's Knot performs *L'ospedale*



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