

A dervish at large in the cathedral

Sufi mysticism meets a massed choir in Salisbury; a young playwright builds on earlier promise; cool jazz with a film-noir vibe

MUSIC
Where Two Worlds Touch
Salisbury Cathedral, England
★★★★☆

David Honigmann

The evening sun was shining at full force through the west window. "The mystics are gathering," intoned the storyteller Ashley Ramsden from the balcony, followed by the crash of a gong and a fanfare of brass. Four singers in turn sang words of welcome, with soprano vibrato or cantor's flutter; Hebrew, Urdu, Farsi, Arabic and Sanskrit all combined. On stage, in front of a massed choir Ziya Azazi, a dervish, began to whirl, his white robes flying up into a disc.

The evening, a commission by the Salisbury International Arts Festival, revolved around Rumi. *Where Two Worlds Touch* set Ramsden's selection of poems by the 13th-century Sufi poet, and by the Persian poet Hafiz and medieval Christian mystics of the same period, to music by Howard Moody and Helen Chadwick.

Rumi prophesied that his work would return to prominence when it was most needed. In keeping with this, the selection of works highlighted the poet's vision of the unity of all faiths.

The form of the performance mirrored the argument, awash with doublings. There were two choirs: one on stage by the west door, one calling back from underneath the spire behind the audience. There were two composers: Moody scoring for brass as if for organ, occasionally pulling out all the stops with tubular bells and bleating cornetto; Chadwick writing sweet polyphony with the faintest gospel undertone. Up on a balcony Ramsden periodically recited poems; higher yet were three women singers.

But all was in the service of a single vision. "All religions/all this singing/is one song". When Rumi died in 1273 (about the time that this cathedral was being built), the readings at his funeral came from the Koran, the Gospels, the Pentateuch and the Zend-Avesta. Similarly, the words here came from many sources: St John Chrysostom, Mechtild of Magdeburg and Hildegard of Bingen.

The music had the same diverse hinterland: Moody's setting of "Bemirid" had a Weimar vamp; his

"Birdsong" set off a Messiaenic glockenspiel pattern with whistling from the choirs; in "Labbeyk" the glockenspiel was more of a hubble-bubble, rounded off with a gasped choral exhalation.

Chadwick's three-woman choir on the top balcony showed off some of her brightest writing, as did the joyous folk melody she produced for "Keeping Watch". She played with and off the words: the melody flexing under "we are lions rolling and unrolling on flags", or falling away under "the sun slides down", as Azazi, now black-clad, orbited the tenor soloist.

Moody worked the space of the cathedral. Towards the end, the second choir processed into the side aisles. When the soloists sang the dying words of Catherine of Siena ("Sangue! Sangue! Sangue!"), counterpointed with a chattering Abrahamic chant, the words ricocheted up the nave, bouncing from side to side as clumps of singers repeated them like echoes in a cave, ending with another sharp staccato exhalation.

At the end, Azazi was clad in green, twirling his skirt above his head. The second choir flowed up on to stage around him. The music rose joyfully. Then Azazi span away up the aisle, like a tree caught in a slow whirlwind.

www.salisburyfestival.co.uk

THEATRE
The Acid Test
Royal Court Jerwood Theatre
Upstairs, London
★★★★☆

Ian Shuttleworth

It is a most peculiar feeling to be commenting on a writer consolidating her dramatic skills and developing a distinctive voice when the writer in question is not yet out of her teens. Last year, Anya Reiss, then aged 18, broke Christopher Hampton's 1966 record as the youngest Royal Court playwright, and won a brace of major Most Promising awards for her examination of just-pre-teen sexuality in *Spur Of The Moment*. *The Acid Test* builds appealingly on that promise.

On this occasion the central clutch of characters are just a little bit older



One voice:
'Where Two Worlds Touch';
below, Phoebe Fox
in 'The Acid Test'

James Harris;
Manuel Harlan

than Reiss: three flatmates in their early 20s. When one arrives home on a Friday night with her just-separated father in tow, a long night of booze, dope and personal crises ensues.

Reiss still has moments of uncertainty writing for older characters – she knows, for example, that the moment of embarrassing dad-dancing she includes is a cliché and does not overdo it, but she does put it there in the first place – but when she focuses on characters, views and moods rather than moments of middle-aged tone, she scarcely puts a foot wrong.

The generational mood itself is excellently achieved when it is closer to home: the banter and the self-dramatisation of the three young women is simply spot on.

It is this self-dramatisation that is the play's real subject. Relationship break-up, career sex, job loss and attempted suicide all take place during the 90 minutes of the play, but all offstage, reported and recounted. This is not a failing of the basic

dramatic maxim "show, don't tell"; on the contrary, what Reiss is showing is how the four characters respond, how they cast themselves in their own dramas, how they are constructing their lives from these experiences and how significant those may or may not turn out to be. As with *Spur Of The Moment*, the climactic confrontation is a little contrived, but Reiss then conscientiously works to move beyond it.

Paul Wills has designed an immersive shared-flat space reached, in the theatre, by passing several identical doors to neighbouring flats.

Simon Godwin adroitly directs Vanessa Kirby (as the beautiful but insecure one), Lydia Wilson (as the filially ungrateful one), Phoebe Fox (as the semihysterical one) and Denis Lawson (as the old one). And Reiss continues to show the kind of youthful talent that makes even Polly Stenham – the now-24-year-old writer of *That Face* – look superannuated.

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