

The Finnish Prisoner

The Paddock at Unit 9, Phoenix Place, Lewes, July 11

Anyone hearing that Lewes had hosted a co-production with the Finnish National and Finnish Chamber Operas might reasonably assume we were talking about Glyndebourne. So it was quite a coup for The Paddock—a small local production company whose biggest hit to date has been a wonderfully witty but parlour-sized version of Daisy Ashford's *The Young Visitors* designed to play in people's living rooms—to have secured such major international input into what was in essence a 'community' opera. The lure, of course, is revealed in the title.

With music by Orlando Gough (the inspirational force behind the multi-ethnic, poly-stylistic choir The Shout), a libretto by Stephen Plaice (a former writer in residence at Lewes Prison and scriptwriter for *The Bill*, who also wrote the texts for Glyndebourne's acclaimed youth opera trilogy and for last year's hip-hop version of *Così*) and direction by The Paddock's artistic director Susannah Walters (a former opera singer turned novelist, playwright and all-round animateur), *The Finnish Prisoner* celebrates the extraordinary emotional bond that built up between the people of Victorian Lewes and some 350 Finnish POWs held in the town's old Naval Prison for the duration of the Crimean War.

The actual link-up came about when Plaice visited Helsinki himself, on tour with the Glyndebourne 'hip-hopera', and discovered that the story of the Finnish prisoners' captivity in Lewes is remembered in one of Finland's best-loved folk songs, the *Oolannin Sota* (Song of the Åland War), while his Finnish hosts were equally thrilled to hear that this episode in their history was being made into an opera in Sussex. Hence the co-production, the most audible result of which was the participation of eight Finnish singers (tenors and basses) as the POWs themselves.

In an opera whose plot is all about the power of love and lust to reach out across the gulfs of language, race, time and space, their very presence and hair-raisingly deep-toned rendition of the *Oolannin Sota* added an extra frisson of ethnic authenticity and vocal authority to the resonances already reverberating from the fact that the opera was being staged in a disused industrial warehouse just yards from the site of the former prison (now a car park) where their 19th-century compatriots were incarcerated, and just a few yards further from the surviving memorial to 28 of their number who died in captivity.

But if the Finns' singing of the *Oolannin Sota* was an undoubted high point of the opera, it was only one among many. Gough's score, ingeniously written for a quirky quartet of violin, accordion, bass clarinet and marimba/vibraphone (often sounding like a Victorian harmonium with added attitude), and conducted with just the right sense of swell and swing by John Hancorn, was notable for its astute pacing of solo and ensemble scenes, its seamless transitions between past and present and the mystical meeting-ground between, the expressive naturalness of the solo vocal lines and the cumulative power of the multi-layered, often rhythmically intricate choral writing, which included some challenging singing-and-clapping games for the children.

As the modern American miss, Marcia Bellamy brought a lithe mezzo and strong characterization to the role of Cora Combe (agonizing comically, pre-hot date, over the post-feminist quandary of 'Should you dress for the man?'), while young Joanna Scopp (Flora in last autumn's Glyndebourne *Turn of the Screw*) was radiantly pure-toned as Cora's great-great-grandmother Lily, who falls fatally for Matts, one of the Finns, poignantly sung (as both man and ghost) by Jarmo Ojala. Stephen Chaundy was suitably conflicted if occasionally over-stretched as the necrophiliac photographer John