

Adopting a Pose

Barry Millington admires a world-class 'Tristan' in West Horsley

Tristan und Isolde. Gwyn Hughes Jones (Tristan), Rachel Nicholls (Isolde), David Stout (Kurwenal), Christine Rice (Brangäne), Matthew Rose (King Mark), Mark Le Brocq (Melot/Young Sailor), Sam Utley (Shepherd), Thomas Isherwood (Steersman); The Gascoigne Orchestra/Stephen Barlow; Charles Edwards (director/designer), Gabrielle Dalton (costumes), Tim Mitchell (lighting). Grange Park, 18 June 2023



Rachel Nicholls as Isolde, in resplendent Pre-Raphaelite dress, muses on Frau Minne's prowess at archery.
Photo: Marc Brenner

Charles Edwards's own sets for his new *Tristan und Isolde* at Grange Park adorn three spaces (one for each act) referencing the iconography of the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood, more or less contemporaneous with Wagner's opera. Though none of the chief Pre-Raphaelites – Dante Gabriel Rossetti, John Everett Millais, William Holman Hunt – was exactly a paid-up Wagnerite, their celebration of mediaevalism and myth makes them a natural counterpart for *Tristan* (the legend of Tristram and Yseult was very much in vogue at the time). As the production unfolds, however, it becomes clear that the association is not merely a decorative one. What Edwards establishes is more like a dialectic between the imagined and the real, or more broadly art and life, in which both the visual arts and literature play a part.

The set for Act I is a skilfully realised Victorian parlour (lighting by Tim Mitchell). On the left-hand wall is superimposed a tree based on the design by Angelo Quaglio II for the third act of the 1865 *Tristan* premiere in Munich. Visible through windows in the far wall are the large sail and the curious ram-like prow from Quaglio's Act I (there's confusion in the programme book, incidentally, between Quaglio's 1865 sets and those of 1886 by Max Brückner for the first Bayreuth production). Elsewhere Heinrich Döll's set for Act II of the Munich production (with the steps leading to Isolde's chamber on the left and blossoming trees on the right) is also referenced. Rachel Nicholls's Isolde has, in the first act, back-length auburn hair, like one of the many captivating young ladies paraded in Pre-Raphaelite canvases. For the second act, as befits a queen, she has pinned it up, but by the third act she's a free spirit and it's down her back again. Gabrielle Dalton's stylish, opulent costumes also reference the myth as seen through 19th-century eyes.

The ditty of the Young Sailor at the opening is given a malevolent twist by Mark Le Brocq, who breaks into the space inhabited by Isolde and Brangäne to mock the former savagely. It certainly helps to ignite Isolde's fury at the way she's consistently been treated even before the curtain rises. This is the back-story to her anger, of course. Her betrothed, Morold, was decapitated by Tristan and his head sent back to Ireland, instead of the demanded tribute. Tristan then has the gall to return to Ireland, thinly disguised by a feeble anagram, to be healed by her of the wound sustained in the fight with Morold. Finally, she is claimed by the Cornish King Mark as wife, and Tristan, of all people, has come to fetch her. This back-story, related in graphic detail in Gottfried von Strassburg's telling of the legend, emerges piecemeal during the monologues of the first act, but rarely has it seemed so stark a catalyst for Isolde's anger as here. I'm still not sure, without seeing it again, how Nicholls and Edwards managed it, but a few things stood out. The moment Isolde is reminded of the potions concocted by her mother, a glint enters her eyes that would make a dragon-slayer's knees tremble. Later, when Tristan cites convention ('Look to the custom!') as the reason for his coolness towards her, she laughs out loud. Later still, when she imagines how Tristan would have presented her to King Mark ('a gentler wife you could never have won: I murdered her betrothed and sent his head home to her') she dons his military cap and struts up and down in front of him – a moment of bitter humour.

During the scenes where Tristan is observed alone with Kurwenal to the rear of the stage, he is seen to be writing. At the end of the act, the sailors are not simply heard offstage but burst aggressively into Isolde's chamber. The Young Sailor is among them:

he scrutinises Tristan's jottings (the meaning of which is revealed only later), then tears them into pieces, which he showers in the air like mock confetti. King Mark arrives alone, dressed as a Victorian paterfamilias. With the 'offstage' trumpeters also making their presence forcefully felt onstage, it makes for a powerful curtain.

The set for the second act is another Victorian-style chamber, with potted palms and more motifs from the 1865 Munich sets, but on the left a picture (from a medieval coffret) of Frau Minne, the German goddess of love, drawing a bow and aiming at the heart of a young man. Isolde wears a resplendent green Pre-Raphaelite dress, and as she prepares for Tristan's entry she tries out various poses, including the one of the archer in the picture. Later in the act Tristan contemplates the harp, as though recalling his legendary status as a minstrel (in Gottfried's story he disguises himself as a minstrel when sailing across the water to be cured by Isolde).

In the love duet, especially in the earlier stages, Tristan and Isolde edge hesitantly towards each other, like a couple of novices on a blind date. That coolness and other gestures suggest they are acting a part, perhaps in a drama unfolding in real time before our eyes. At the end of the act Tristan and Isolde retreat to one side with the goblet and a phial, presumably resigned to death, though their progress is interrupted by Melot.

The set for Act III is another interior space, with the 1865 elements rearranged imaginatively to suggest a view to the sea at the rear, with the prow on the right to betoken the eventual arrival of the ships. In the love duet Tristan had hailed the Gates of Death that had opened up to him 'the magic realm of night' and in a series of striking lighting cues, those gates are flung open to the left as Tristan, in his delirium, hears their clangorous sound. As he fantasises about Isolde crossing the water to him, his vision of her, with arm raised, is projected on the back wall.

A mound of paper has built up on a desk to the left, a continuation of the presumably autobiographical script Tristan was penning in the first act. Kurwenal, and later others, consult it to see how the story will end, but it seems that Tristan himself doesn't know. He walks through the Gates of Death on his own, but in a deeply moving Liebestod Isolde strips off her Pre-Raphaelite dress to simple black and white garb, flexing her muscles, caressing herself. It's a celebration of independent womanhood, and though she looks with momentary regret towards where Tristan has exited, she finally walks, newly empowered, into the light. No longer the chattel exchanged between patriarchal rulers, nor the submissive helpmeet, blinded by love, in a bourgeois drama, she now achieves the kind of agency – long discerned by feminist musicologists – expressed by her decorporalised voice in the final orchestral bars of the work.

The skill with which Nicholls develops this character, both vocally and dramatically, can hardly be overstated. Her voice may not have the laser-like projection or sheer fire-power of some of the fondly remembered Isoldes of the past, but her musical intelligence shines through. Neither, mercifully, did Gwyn Hughes Jones shout his way through the part as one so often hears these days on the great stages of the world, not least those that have completely exposed pits such as at Vienna and Leipzig. His enactment of Tristan's psychic breakdown in Act III was curiously, but not unsuccessfully, interiorised. Both resonance and diction might be improved if he were to deploy his lips with more mobility.

David Stout's Kurwenal was sturdily sung and beautifully characterised, while Christine Rice's eloquent Brangäne had considerable authority. Matthew Rose, got up to resemble Otto Wesendonck, his real-life counterpart in the drama playing itself out in and around the Asyl in 1850s Zurich, was in excellent voice as King Mark. Doubling as Melot, Mark Le Brocq brought the same robustness to the role as he did to the Young Sailor.

Stephen Barlow's unfolding of the Prelude seemed inordinately leisurely, indeed listless, robbing it of dramatic tension – a criticism which could also be levelled at stretches of the first act. The love music of the second act, however, benefited enormously from his empathy for both score and singers, coaxing from them wonderfully cultivated tone and shapely phrasing. His skill in teasing out the sonorities of individual instruments in an intimately chamber-like manner (the members of the Gascoigne Orchestra responding with enormously sensitive playing) served exceptionally well in the final stages of the last act, which has surely never sounded more exquisite.

All credit to Wasfi Kani, the shrewd chatelaine of Grange Park, for assembling this world-class *Tristan* in a house built from scratch in less than a year, lacking the infrastructure – and budgets – of the international big-hitters. A feat worthy of Wagner himself.