

## Elephant and Castle

### *Aldeburgh Festival at Snape Maltings, June 21*

With its terraces, Hepworth Lawn and reedbeds—not to mention the auditorium itself—Snape Maltings might have been designed for a perambulatory, site-specific event. *Elephant and Castle*, devised and directed by Tim Hopkins with music by Mira Calix and Tansy Davies, is exactly that, and if you're wondering why London's eyesore of a shopping centre is the subject of the Aldeburgh project, the link is that the two buildings, intended for quite different purposes (culture and consumerism), opened within a couple of years of each other in the 1960s, and are both now about to be redeveloped. Observing that there was a progressive social vision behind both projects,

even though one has proved a lasting success and the other a catastrophe, Hopkins set out to co-ordinate a cross-genre work that would address the assumptions behind those contrasts.

It was an ambitious venture and precisely the sort of thing an institution such as Aldeburgh should be doing to breathe new life into the form. The audience was gratifyingly heterogeneous—certainly not dominated by the conventional silver-haired constituency familiar there—and although not everything went as smoothly as might have been hoped (the second performance, which I saw, was less disaster-prone than the first), it was nevertheless an adventurous and impressive use of multiple resources that gave one much to ponder on.

In the first scene a harried mother (Jo Risebero) drives her exasperating children, Hansel and Gretel (Rachel Nicholls and Bibi Heal), out onto the streets. The location of the Dovecot, to the side of the Maltings auditorium, enabled the audience to get painfully close to the family and its predicament. For Scene 2 we were led round to the Terrace, where some of us were even more painfully subjected to the amplified ambient noise of the Elephant and Castle roundabout. Film projected onto a giant screen unfolded the planners' vision of a more integrated society, while rebarbative electronic collages of traffic and demolition noise provided their own pungent commentary.

The third scene implausibly transformed the reedbed into an urban shopping centre which afforded a paradise for the deprived Hansel and Gretel (the very starkness of the contrast made the point graphically). Short, punchy vocal lines were tracked by belligerent saxophone ejaculations and punctuated by bass thumps; if the world of Brecht and Weill didn't seem far away, how better to evoke alienation?

Images of an infant being led by the hand inevitably recalled tragic, well-publicized cases of child abduction—a modern take on the Hansel and Gretel story. This was a theme developed in the fourth scene, where another giant screen projected first just the feet, then the faces, of anonymous members of the audience: ordinary people seeming potentially sinister in a different context.

The most powerful scene was the fifth, for which the auditorium became a bingo hall, with a caller (Martin Hyder) chanting the magic incantations in increasingly ominous style, a cinema organ (played by Helen Reid in a splendid blonde wig) that descended authentically to below floor level, and a huge fruit machine projected on a 'gingerbread house' along with other graphics of incipient violence.

The banality of Blake Morrison's text, in this section and elsewhere, could be justified only as an analogue of the impoverished argot of the drama's participants, just as the music of Mira Calix and Tansy Davies similarly captured the desperation, alienation and brutalization of the characters and their grim environment.

For Scene 6 we returned outside, to the Hepworth Lawn and the reedbeds, now transformed by the designer Pippa Nissen with twinkling lights into a world of enchantment. The sounds of the Beatles' iconic anthem to happiness, 'All you need is love' (rendered by a band billed as Imagine the Beatles), warmed the cockles of the hearts of the family—now blissfully reunited—and audience alike.

This was not quite the end, however: against the backdrop of further images of the Elephant and Castle, the ensemble, heroically co-ordinating with the action under the direction of Julian Warburton, challenged the Beatles idyll with further electronically distorted interjections. A final electronic flourish that may have been a muffled scream questioned the happy-ever-after conclusion offered by the scenario. BARRY MILLINGTON