

Round-up

The London Fringe

One of the best shows of the year was not in London's fashionable Theatreland, but in grungy old Dalston in the east of the capital, at the Arcola Theatre's annual **Grimeborn Festival**.

I'd always thought *Werther* just an enjoyably soupy melodrama – which just made Aylin Bozok's staging the more arresting. Her quasi-expressionist production posited it as a harbinger of *Pelléas*, with bags more unsaid than said and a creeping atmosphere of fear and psychosis. Doesn't sound much like *Werther*, does it?

And yet this made a brilliant backcloth to the drama of two harrowed hearts.

The focus here was totally on Katie Bray's Charlotte, a performance of unsparing bravery and total immersion to explain a frozen soul longing for warmth: this Charlotte was crippled by the shade of her dead mother, whose baleful imaginary presence turns the girl to stone physically and emotionally.

This was a real turning screw of a production, from the moment when Charlotte and Werther walk in the moonlight and ache to touch but dare not

... and then find a way by dancing together shyly. For once Werther's outbursts felt not pathetic and adolescent but strong and true. He is *right*, you think, there's no point to their lives if they are apart: 'Pourquoi me reveiller?' indeed. The lovers cooked up Wagnerian levels of yearning to go with the obvious musical influences. Charlotte's letter scene was devastating, a violent internal struggle expressed wholly through the voice, with minimal but telling action – an astonishing range and depth of expressive registers as Charlotte strove to become her true self.

The final scene too was really intense, the kiss the pair finally accomplish as Werther dies reaching cathartic levels of emotional release. Adam Tunnicliffe inevitably played second string to Bray, but making Werther a worthwhile human is an achievement in itself. Philip Voldman played the piano brilliantly, too, in a roiling, turbid, Romantic reading that excavated all of this music's many layers.

★★★★

The rest of Grimeborn was the usual mix 'n' match, the next best show a highly imaginative and affecting double-bill of Walton's *Façade* and Maxwell Davies's *Eight Songs for a Mad King*, brilliantly located in a hospital for recovering World War One soldiers. *Façade* was completely stripped of its usual arch childishness and turned out full of unexpected human depths when performed as a kind of therapy game by Charmian Bedford and Danny Standing, faultless in delivery and dramatic emotion and backed by a beautifully schooled seven-piece band conducted by Oliver Zeffman. This setting also put the work's true nature as a '20s piece in relief: absolutely part of a European avant-garde, standing beside Weill and Shostakovich, Walton's early talent one of those genuinely hopeful moments in English music doomed, like most of them, to curdle to bourgeois infantilism.

Samuel Pantcheff, playing a shell-shocked soldier who believes he is King George, delivered a bravura rendition of Peter Maxwell Davies's songs, full of human pity, humour and violence, and (in everyone's favourite bit) grabbing and smashing one of the band's violins. Nice one.

★★★★★



A performance of unsparing bravery: Katie Bray as Charlotte in *Werther*