



Opera

## Ned Kelly review - new opera interrogates bushranger's fierce but fragile masculinity

★★★★☆

**Steve Dow**

🐦 @dowsteve

Mon 18 Feb 2019 12.00 AEDT

Librettist Peter Goldsworthy described his Ned Kelly opera, co-written with composer Luke Styles, as a “three-act pub crawl”.

It’s an apt reminder of how this 19th century tale of a wild gang dressed in DIY suits of armour has embedded itself in Australia’s nationalist masculine mythology, situating the work in the beer barns where such legends of defiance traditionally go to be rudely embellished.

In this 90-minute retelling by Western Australia’s [Lost and Found Opera](#), which premiered in a huge disused corrugated iron timber mill in bushland at Jarrahdale as part of Perth festival, Styles has chosen to leave out quite a lot of the much-told tale of Kelly and his outlaw cohorts.

He skips most of the Irish-Australian bushranger's early life in country Victoria, as well as Kelly's later trial and hanging in Melbourne at age 25 for the murder of a constable. Instead, with a couple of time jumps, Styles concentrates on the gang's rampages on the run between 1878 and 1880, hopping from one hotel in Euroa to another in Jerilderie, then staging the infamous shootout with police at Stringybark Creek at which three officers were killed, until finally all bush tracks lead to a pub at Glenrowan, the site of the gang's last stand.

Against a gorgeous, subtly lit natural backdrop of bushland, Ned Kelly (baritone Samuel Dundas) attempts to put into writing his justifications for his misdeeds with help from his opium-smoking pal Joe Byrne (bass baritone Adrian Tamburini). Kelly complains of injustices against Irish settlers, in particular the law's brutal treatment of his mother, Ellen (mezzo soprano Fiona Campbell), and declares his desire for a republic of north-east Victoria.



▲ Fiona Campbell's warm tones as Kelly's mother Ellen bookend the opera. Photograph: Toni Wilkinson/Perth Festival 2019

The six opera performers are uniformly strong. Dundas, seen recently as Marcello in [Opera Australia's production of La Bohème](#) on Sydney Harbour, makes a charismatic and complex Ned, his mellifluous tone resonating in the challenging location, with the mill shed's high ceiling and large beams partly exposed to the elements.

The performers are backed by two acoustic folk musicians and a dozen string, wind and percussion players from the West Australian Symphony Orchestra, as well as two dozen chorister-dancers sourced from the local community. The chorus is

strongest when arrayed artfully around the stage, but it sometimes slows the opera's pace, particularly when its members folk dance at length around the bushrangers. At times I struggled to comprehend what the chorus was singing.

Styles suggests the most moving element of his opera is the conversation Kelly has with police sergeant Michael Kennedy at Stringybark before killing him, but I didn't quite feel the pathos of that moment. For me, the most emotionally affecting elements involve Campbell's sublime warm tones as Ellen, bookending the opera with the prologue and epilogue, and two intermezzos she performs that outline the oppression the family faced, leading to her defiance: "Die like a Kelly, my darling boy," she sings.

Ellen also repeatedly sings a bush ballad, *The Wild Colonial Girl*, in reference to herself. It's a clever rewrite of the era's famous song *The Wild Colonial Boy*, originally penned with another male bushranger in mind, but which newspaper the *Argus* reported was sung to the Kelly gang at Glenrowan in 1880. When soprano Pia Harris, playing Ned's younger sister Kate, harmonises with her mother, we are reminded the Kelly story is not merely one of lionised male masculinity.



▲ Ned Kelly: the embodiment of the Australian jack-of-all-trades masculine myth. Photograph: Toni Wilkinson/Perth festival 2019

Ned, meanwhile, is a metaphor for the shaping of white Australian male settler identity, a growing but fragile sense of a jack-of-all-trades, self-sufficient man of the land.

Ned Kelly tried on different identities in his short life: before a career in bank robbing and murder, he was a horse breaker, log splitter, fence builder, stonemason, bullock driver and whiskey distiller, a list to which this opera adds nurturer. Kelly, we are told, helped raise the younger children in the household and was also, apparently, an enthusiastic beekeeper.

Ned and Joe Byrne dress up here in stolen police uniforms, as Tamburini intones that “right and wrong are flipsides of the spinning coin of fate”, making us ponder the thin line between law-abiding and law-breaking. A potentially more interesting line is crossed when Steve Hart (tenor Robert Macfarlane) humorously but enthusiastically cross-dresses, revelling in a green frock while dancing beer tankard in hand. This element, and the gang’s wearing of women’s clothing to evade police - not shown in this show - deserves more exploration on stage, given its surprising challenge to Aussie machismo.

This Ned is much more nuanced than the flatly characterised, fake-bearded Ned offered in another musical in Sydney last year. But while Plush Duck Productions’ Ned tried to cover too much territory, Lost and Found Opera’s could afford to flesh out more of the bushranger’s fury and flaws. A clearer delineation of the oppression Kelly feels would help us understand what might have driven the outlaw’s republican campaign.

Nonetheless, this is a solid, gripping production, mostly because the music and performances are terrific, although occasionally the orchestra gets lost behind the two folk musicians who are seated closer to the audience and performers than the symphony members.

This Ned has the potential to become a transcendent stage figure, a deeper wellspring of flawed Australian masculinity - hero, myth or otherwise.

*Ned Kelly plays at Jarrahdale, south-east of Perth, for Perth festival until Tuesday 19 January*

*Steve Dow was a guest of Perth festival*

---