



Opera

## Oscar and Lucinda review – Peter Carey's novel refracted into operatic colour

★★★★☆

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**W**hen you hold a prism of glass up to the light, you experience an ordinary but remarkable miracle of science: light bends and refracts, and on its journey it creates rainbows. It's a fact of physics. It's a splintering, a dispersion. It's beautiful.

And just like rainbows out of glass comes Oscar and Lucinda, a poetic/intellectual contemporary chamber opera based on Peter Carey's Booker and Miles Franklin award-winning novel. [The book](#) - an interrogation into and subversion of Australian colonialism through the lens of an unlikely pair - has been finely woven and condensed here for Sydney Chamber Opera by librettist Pierce Wilcox, side characters streamlined into a neat cast of six.

Oscar (Brenton Spiteri) and Lucinda (Jessica Aszodi) are united by shared obsessions: chance, predestination, and the practical extension of both: religion, yes, but mostly gambling. Lucinda speaks and acts like a woman before her time; Oscar is an earnest yet defrocked minister. They see beauty in each other – unbearable, angelic beauty. Like the beauty of glass. Lucinda bets Oscar her inheritance that he cannot take her masterwork – a cathedral made out of glass – safely from Sydney to Bellingen on the New South Wales mid-north coast.

In the opera, directed with steadfast compassion by Patrick Nolan, we follow Oscar and Lucinda's divergent, far-flung childhoods – hers in Australia, on stolen land (a fact with which she is rightly, profoundly uncomfortable); his in England, where a complex relationship with his father and a call to God shape Oscar into an anxious, yearning adult. When they finally meet, at the end of the first act, the opera blooms open. It's a delightful, near-giddy collision, a moment you can't help wish came a little earlier.



It's so difficult to condense a novel like Carey's into a two-act narrative (the book is bursting with life and populated by irresistible personalities), but the strength of Wilcox's libretto lies in its narrowest focus, when it looks little elsewhere than Oscar and Lucinda themselves. It is at its best when it takes Carey's lyrical, emotive words and gives them music, but it also relies on audience recognition of those words and the chapters surrounding them; you need to understand their weight in the original text to follow the action onstage. Without that knowledge, it would be hard to feel the story's internal momentum and shape as it advances. It doesn't quite stand on its own as a work, its narrative buried in references and ideas rather than clarity of plot.

There's more clarity in composer Elliott Gyger's score, which takes Carey's gift for shards of story, written in a voice that makes poetry from the mundane, and spins it out through a musical prism. The result: spiky musical vignettes that flash and bend like rainbows. There's a reckless beauty to the score that can only come from careful forethought and construction; when the ensemble of 16 play through it, conducted by Jack Symonds, you can feel that care. Elegant, clever motifs disappear and reappear like shadows - the hint of a wager, the presence of love, the lingering expectations inherited from a mother and father - and once you acclimate to the soundscape, which sounds jagged and strange to the ear at first, it begins to take you over, setting your heart to new rhythms.



Spiteri and Aszodi's voices respond to each other's like they're reaching out with both hands, a harmonic chase of caramel tones and prayer, and, thankfully, twists of wit and fun. Jane Sheldon provides an essential rich counterpoint as Miriam Chadwick, and along with Mitchell Riley, Simon Lobelson and Jeremy Kleeman, lend strength and voice to the entire world outside Oscar and Lucinda themselves - both chorus and community.

On a minimalist set by Anna Tregloan, which is a study in the tension between matter - all stone, water and the idea of glass - it falls to Damien Cooper's romantic, evocative lighting design to create time, space and the divine from rocks and buckets and a hint of earth. A small tank, constantly filled with water and agitated by hand, lulls us over the sea and guides us on board the ship, the Leviathan, that brings Oscar and Lucinda together. The glass cathedral and the Bellinger River are writ in miniature, and so are Lucinda's beloved glassworks. Everything enormous is made small and precious here. You could almost hold this opera in your hands. There's something heartbreaking about that.



*Oscar and Lucinda is showing at Carriageworks until 3 August*