

Review

Love Burns (State Opera South Australia)

State Opera South Australia delivers yet another successful revival as part of its Lost Operas of Oz program.

Plant 4, Bowden, Adelaide

Reviewed on 5 June, 2021

by *Brett Allen-Bayes* on 7 June, 2021

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State Opera South Australia's ongoing series The Lost Operas of Oz continues with Graeme Koehne and Louis Nowra's chamber opera *Love Burns*. Premiered at the 1992 Adelaide Festival by the Seymour Group, it has had a few revivals since then. My introduction to the work dates back to 1998 and the co-production between OzOpera and Company B Belvoir (as it was then), directed effectively by Neil Armfield. Due to its relatively short running time (65 minutes), it was then cleverly coupled with Bernstein's equally brief suburban opera, *Trouble in Tahiti*, directed by Lindy Hume. State Opera has chosen to present it in an ingenious stand-alone production directed by Nicholas Cannon within what could almost be described as a rather rudimentary warehouse space with a small cast of singers on a slightly raised stage and the 10-piece orchestra on the floor in front of them.



Love Burns, State Opera South Australia , 2021 Photo Soda Street Productions

Premiered in the same year as its librettist's popular play *Così*, which is set inside a mental institution wherein the inmates decide to perform Mozart's *Così Fan Tutte*, the libretto shares much in common with plenty of sardonic and black humour. The plot is based on the film *The Honeymoon Killers* (1969) and a true case from the late forties, where a criminal gigolo (Jack) feigns love to steal money from lonely, ageing widows. Angela, a former nurse, initially one of his victims, pairs up and assists him in his deception until jealousy sets in and the whole plan unravels.

Composer Graeme Koehne is best known for his ballets and orchestral works, and in *Love Burns*, dance is never far away within its waltz and tango rhythms, and as part of Jack's seduction method. The score is affirmingly tonal and direct with a nod towards French modernism and such Americans as Ned Rorem and Virgil Thomson, who was one of Koehne's teachers. The cast of five is a strong one who cope very well with the demands of Koehne's score, singing with passion and finding much humour to bring out from the libretto. Well cast as Jack, Mark Oates is a compelling and charming force whose eye is always after the money and the next victim, whilst Jessica Dean is an excellent foil to him, singing cleanly, although she is prettier than the overweight, neurotic nurse who becomes his partner in crime, life and on film. The supporting cast of three (Cherie Boogaart, Rosanne Hosking and Jeremy Tatchell) each play several supporting roles with flair. Together, with much choreographed movement, they ensure the quick removals of props, the onwards surge of the score and the inevitability of the plot.

There is great balance between the singers, and the 10-piece orchestra – consummately led by conductor Anthony Hunt – is expert in handling Koehne's witty score and its rhythms with assured ease. Remember that during the time when this was composed, Piazzolla's tangos were all the rage, and of course, the dance itself is the dance of seduction. Amongst the finely chosen musicians, particular praise must go to the unerring charm of Janis Laurs (cello), as well as the brass and winds (Samantha Hennessy, Peter Taylor, Kristina Phillipson and Tim Kennihan). Mention should also be made to the excellence of Simone Romaniuk's sets and Cannon's unerring eye when it comes to the finer details and machinations when played out on such a small set. This tragic tale is told with understated humour and brio; never does the score or plot lag and the sound – the balance between musicians and soloists, given the rather unfriendly natural acoustics of the space, was warm and clear. Yet another successful revival, on to the next, please.

Entertainment Arts

Review: Love Burns, by State Opera of SA

State Opera's latest in a series of almost forgotten and overlooked Australian operas is rewarding on reacquaintance.



Ewart Shaw

Love burns. Love heals. Love and death, the motive forces of opera, here galvanise the lives of a seedy dance instructor and a psychopathic former nurse who starts the show by trying to kill a patient.

On a small stage in a corner of a repurposed factory, two desperate losers make their murderous mark.

Almost 30 years from the 1992 Adelaide Festival premiere, Graeme Koehne's sparsely textured score for chamber ensemble stands up well, and Anthony Hunt is alert to the shifts of rhythm and emotional temperature.

But 30 years on and Adelaide has much more experience of suburban serial killers. The shocks are muted but the laughs are still there.

Louis Nowra's vernacular libretto is catalogued as an "opera ironico" in which the grand themes of Verdi's Macbeth, and yes, Sondheim's Sweeney Todd, become domestic. "Don't eat the pies? Don't drink the cocoa."

Director Nicholas Cannon draws on Jack's profession, with choreographed moments on a severe set, designed, like the almost colourless costumes by Simone Romaniuk and lit by Ben Flett. Its conscious drabness underscores the banality of their lives.

Cannon is well served by his cast. Jessica Dean is Angela, an angel of death, with her incisive singing contrasting with the matter of fact nature of her murderous and conscienceless approach to life.

Mark Oates has a seductive line in sleaze, sings finely, and ends up emotionally drained. By the way, whatever he calls himself when romancing rich widows, his name is Jack. Jack Worthing perhaps, that other cunning seducer?