

LIMELIGHT

Music, Arts & Culture

Review

The Tell-Tale Heart (State Opera South Australia)

Dennis Vaughan's one-man opera, based on Edgar Allan Poe's macabre tale, is powerfully performed in this State Opera South Australia production, staged in a unique setting.

Z Ward, Glenside, Adelaide
Reviewed on 1 July, 2021

Z Ward, now curated by the National Trust, is an old building which formerly housed the criminally insane. This may initially appear to be the most inappropriate venue for staging an opera but when that opera is a setting of Edgar Allan Poe's creepy short story, *The Tell-Tale Heart*, it is ideal. The claustrophobic set comprises a rather small and sparse cell-like structure constructed in a whitewashed brick and concrete hallway. This setup grants the audience a voyeuristic view of Poe's unnamed, trapped narrator/murderer as he vents his inner paranoia and rage. Dennis Vaughan, who conducts the piece, has contained his eloquent 13-piece band in two catacomb-like former cells set one on top of the other, adding to a well-honed sense of claustrophobia. (It should be remembered that Poe himself suffered from this fear.)



James Egglestone in *The Tell-Tale Heart*, State Opera South Australia. Photograph © Soda Street Productions

Premiered in 2005, Vaughan's piece, a dramatic monologue rather than opera per se, extends Poe's four or five-page macabre tale into an hour of riveting theatre. The work is closer in structure and style to Schoenberg's unsettling *Erwartung* or Maxwell Davies' *Eight Songs for a Mad King*, though here is music which is much more tonally centred. Add what are often 19th-century-based harmonies, the openness of American modernists like Copland and a lot of Bernard Herrmann, and you have some idea of Vaughan's sound world for this work. He has created an almost psychedelic kaleidoscope of appropriate orchestral colour and mood. Musically this work ingeniously uses seesawing accompaniment with short repetitive phrases alternating between 2/4 and 3/4 time. Perhaps most effective in the small orchestra were the winds (flute, clarinet and soprano sax) which often dovetail with or double the vocal lines. Perhaps here the conductor needed to rein them in a bit as they would occasionally drown out the vocals of James Egglestone but this may have been due to the over-reverberant acoustics of this venue. The other musician of note was Raymond Lawrence on keyboards who provided not only piano, but *Addams Family*-like harpsichord, not to mention electronic theremin-like sonics (Dr Who meets M Herrmann), which blended brilliantly as part of Vaughan's overall orchestral colour.

The sole vocalist is tenor James Egglestone, whose identification with his role is highly demanding and complete, both musically and dramatically. He is by turn, highly agitated, uber-confident and boasting, lulled by a false sense of mental security through to sheer panic and mental abandon. Of course, opera is littered with madness from the coloratura of Lucia and Lady Macbeth through to Alban's futile and alienated Everyman, *Wozzeck*. And all of these personae demand a vocal mastery, adaptability and virtuosity on the performer's part. Here Egglestone, who had created the role, was a vocal tour de force, zigzagging from a powerfully delivered confidence (often with great beauty), then effortlessly slipping into an eerie and highly effective falsetto. Clothed simply in garb associated with the 19th century convict – simple collared shirt, flannel high-waisted pants and breeches – he inhabited his small space completely, throwing himself at the bars and climbing the walls one minute, prostrate on the floor the next, then effortlessly mounting the table and chair – the only props within the cell other than a jug and cup. Vaughan has created, and Egglestone inhabits, a completely appropriate phantasmagorical and seemingly hallucinogenic world that is associated not only with Poe but writer ETA Hoffmann and composers like Berlioz and Saint-Saëns.

Lighting (Ben Flett), staging and overall direction (Hugh Halliday) were placed in proficient and well-selected hands. As a live experience, *The Tell-Tale Heart* was highly effective and a unique experience, particularly when it is staged within such an appropriate environment. (Z Ward is a venue more usually given over to nocturnal ghost tours.) Such is the intensity and effectiveness with which it takes over the psyche, I do not think that this mono-drama would make for effective repeated listening as a recording and as such, it should be administered in small, live doses.

Comment *

Full Name *