

Reviews

Cape Town cast create real meaning

OPERA

PORGY & BESS
EDINBURGH FESTIVAL
THEATRE
★★★★★

CAPE Town Opera's big-hearted version of George and Ira Gershwin's *Porgy and Bess* was one of the most thrilling and moving opera productions I've seen in a long time.

OK, there are criticisms – the words weren't always easy to understand, and references to New York didn't make much sense in the production's South African setting. But they're insignificant compared with the show's sheer energy and vitality – the stage was a riot of colour and movement, teeming with telling detail – and with the remarkable vocal talent on display.

Director Christine Crouse's decision to uproot the opera from its original 1930s Carolina setting for a 1970s township brought the opera's race themes vividly to the fore – menacing police raids interrupted the Catfish Row residents' lives. It might be simplistic to suggest that a production set at the height of apartheid allowed the mostly black cast to draw on their own traumatic experiences, but the heartbreaking poignancy and the immediacy of their performances sometimes felt like a body blow.

Even singers in the smaller roles had strong personalities. Aubrey Lodewyk was brimful of charisma as the ill-fated fisherman Jake, and Philisa Sibeko as his wife Clara delivered a gloriously limp version of *Summertime*. Tsakane Valentine Maswanganyi was an impetuous, vulnerable Bess, and Xolela Sixaba stole the show as Porgy. His rich baritone's hard edge gave it a dogged determination, so that when Porgy pursues his beloved after she's run off to New York with "happy dust" dealer Sportin' Life at the show's often grim conclusion, you had the feeling that he might even find her.

DAVID KETTLE

MUSIC

BEST COAST
ABC, GLASGOW
★★

BEST Coast hail from California, where life moves at a different pace, especially if you are slacker queen Bethany Cosentino, pictured, singing about her dreamy boyfriend. Cosentino draws commendably on the 1960s girl group tradition in her songwriting, which means she is always mooning over some guy or



Singers in supporting roles were very strong, but the principal characters were outstanding, particularly Xolela Sixaba as Porgy

picking up the pieces of a broken heart. Judging by the number of young women in her audience, she appears to be speaking their language.

Yet on a rainy night in Glasgow, her lo-fi garage pop paeans to life and love in suburban Los Angeles struggled to make an impression, as she and her rhythm section hit cruise control and stayed in the same gear and the same lane for the whole gig. Things cheered up slightly on the chipper, peppy numbers, which recalled the fizzy, fuzzy indie pop of the C86 scene, but the whole performance was infused with a degree of lassitude.

Cosentino has a lovely voice, imbued with a winning combination of tonal purity and tough-girl attitude, but that mix of cuteness and earthiness could be thrown into sharper, keener and more bright-eyed relief if only the band could hotwire that unremarkable indie backing which seems to be their default setting. Worse still, this was only the first night of their tour, yet already the trio were – excuse the pun – coasting.

FIONA SHEPHERD

MUSIC

INSIDER FESTIVAL
INSHRIACH ESTATE, BY
AVIEMORE
★★★★★

THE official announcement came midway through Saturday afternoon, when Insider festival director Walter Micklethwait declared, in conclusion to the hilarious opening ceremony of this year's Olympic-themed extravaganza: "Let the games commence." But the fun had actually started some 24 hours earlier, as the first wave of revellers – among a sell-out weekend crowd of 1,000 – settled into the stunningly scenic riverside campground, savoured their first pints of the event's infamous favourite lubricant, Thistly Cross Scottish cider, and made their initial selections between three separate stages. An ingeniously concocted line-up of folk, indie, dance and alternative sounds ranged from super-cool Saturday headliners The Phantom Band to the demon Scottish/Irish bagpipe duo of Ross Ainslie and Jarlath Henderson, while audience participation on the sportswear front encompassed Roman

gladiator garb, cross-country skis, a random dinosaur costume (the wearer's backstory being that dinosaurs had their own Olympic star long before the Greeks...) water wings and a plenitude of eye-wateringly tasteless tracksuits. Alongside the music, track and field fixtures included a weekend-long, audience-wide relay race with a gold-painted wooden spoon, and a drummers vs brass players obstacle course, negotiated while competitors simultaneously performed their own live soundtrack – the latter being unquestionably one of the daftest spectacles your critic has ever been privileged to witness.

Among myriad other delights on offer, especially sublime was the four-course repast – complete with matching wines – served twice daily by a yurt-housed pop-up version of the Gardener's Cottage restaurant: a veritable feast indeed, seasonal local produce and optimum flavours all the way. (Look out for the same team popping up in Edinburgh next month.)

The Insider is a true labour-of-love affair on every level, having originated pretty much accidentally from the contrastingly grand-scale failure of the Outsider festival in 2009.

Musicians queue up to play it for a fraction of their usual fee – also among them this time being the poised-for-greatness Admiral Fallow, the ever-resplendent, 16-piece Loveboat Big Band, the ever more captivating Rachel Sermanni and Idlewild's oft-solo frontman Roddy Woomble. With Admiral Fallow's Louis Abbott part-curating Sunday's bill of fare, another particularly salient highlight was Blocestra, comprising around 17 stalwarts from his weekly open mike session, with instrumentation ranging from horns to harp, and the whole assembly colourfully decked out in motley approximations of a team strip. Rarely have the sentiments of the weekend's adopted anthem rung truer: *Everyone's A Winner*.

SUE WILSON

MUSIC

LEITH JAZZ FESTIVAL
VARIOUS VENUES, LEITH
★★★★★

LIKE a phoenix rising from distinctly soggy ashes, the Leith Jazz Festival was revived over the weekend after more than a decade. And even the damp weather didn't rain on the

parade of the publicans who found their establishments packed out for (at least) the daytime gigs which ranged from hard-core blues to 1920s classic jazz. For those who remember the old pub trail of the Edinburgh Jazz Festival, nipping from one hostelry to another, often catching the first set in one pub before zipping along the road to catch the second set in another was a lovely nostalgia trip.

All the names on the bill were local – but they included some of the best on the Edinburgh scene, from pianist Brian Kellock, who was the unofficial artistic director of the event, and whose regular Sunday session at The Shore was a focal point of the weekend for many festival-goers, to the reliably excellent Swing 2012, which specialises in laid-back, Hot Club of France-inspired jazz, and who played on Sunday evening at The Granary.

Indeed, for the jazz aficionado, Sunday was *the* day to get the walking shoes on. And the place to be in the early part of the afternoon was Sofi's Bar where the alto saxophonist Martin Kershaw – a musician you'd rarely get to hear for free – and bassist Ed Kelly held an audience spellbound as they dished up a fantastic, full concert.

Kershaw, a supremely eloquent and lyrical player, was in terrific form, and was well matched with Kelly.

Among the many highlights were an exquisite reading of the Antonio Carlos Jobim heartbreaker *How Insensitive* (which hinted at the Stan Getz influence on Kershaw's upper register playing), a bouncy *All The Things You Are* and a hard-swinging take on Charlie Parker's *Marmaduke*. Horace Silver's *Song For My Father* was a lovely nod to Father's Day.

The Compass proved not to be the best venue for singer Lorna Reid and her intimate duo gig with guitarist Graeme Stephen.

While Kershaw had an attentive audience, she had to contend with noisy diners who were not there to hear the music and didn't care who knew it. Nevertheless, those who did listen were rewarded with some lovely songs served in a tasteful, elegant style by the soulful-sounding Reid and her like-minded accompanist.

A late set by the wonderful Diplomats of Jazz – an Edinburgh institution which, like Swing 2012, used to feature on the old jazz festival pub trail – was the ideal way to round off the weekend. Decked out in their dinner suits, the Diplomats may have had to contend with the football on the TV at the other end of the Constitution Bar, but they did so in style: their exuberant playing on *Crying for the Carolines* and *Sorry* was a joy to behold.

ALISON KERR