

## Arts

## Unconventional stages score highly

**FESTIVAL  
SOUND FESTIVAL:  
OUT OF THE BOX**  
VARIOUS VENUES,  
ABERDEEN

NEW operas in unusual places, the Out of the Box weekend at Aberdeen's Sound festival promised us. And it didn't disappoint, with strange venues including a flat, a farm, a lighthouse and even an old writing desk – and a bus laid on to transport us between them. More to the point, the operas themselves were fresh, often challenging, and boldly fed off their unconventional surroundings.

*Bolted...* (★★★), by Pippa Murphy and Ben Harrison, was a rather over-wrought story of a teenage girl's love for her horse. At times it seemed rather dramatically inert, but using the stables at Aboyne's Belwade Farm as its venue certainly made it evocative.

Back in Aberdeen, an intimate city-centre flat was the location for *The Garden* by Zinnie and John Harris (★★★★), a bleakly dystopian tale of overpopulation and

a despairing urban couple (played compellingly by Pauline Knowles and Alan McHugh) who discover an apple tree growing in their living room. The real revelation, though, was the way Harris's astonishingly expressive vocal lines slipped effortlessly back and forth between speaking and singing.

Probably the furthest away from traditional opera was sound artist Claudia Molitor's *Remember Me* (★★★★★) in Aberdeen Art Gallery, which also comes to Glasgow's Sonica festival from 8 November. Set in and around the writing desk that once belonged to Molitor's grandmother, it was an exquisitely beautiful, fragile work that played with Purcell's opera *Dido and Aeneas* in a sometimes elusive meditation on memory.

Its oblique style won't be to everyone's taste, but there's no denying the power of its imagery – crimson rose petals scattered around the audience, cracked eggs, broken pencils – nor of the ethereal presence of a ghostly Molitor herself, a contact mic snaking up her arm like a throbbing vein. As she



***Bolted...* an equine tale, used Belwade Farm stables to evocative effect**

Picture: Derek Ironside

slowly constructed a miniature opera house within the desk, and whispered a secret message in our ears, it was a work that was captivating and deliciously bewildering in equal measure.

Back on the opera bus, an unscheduled stop brought on board a mysterious man with a cello, babbling stories about Lucifer and Christopher Marlowe. This was the

remarkable cello-playing singer Matthew Sharp in *Faustus* (★★★★) by Stephen Deazley and Martin Riley, and his rich, fruity baritone was ideal for the piece's gothic story.

The real miracle was how he managed to stay standing, singing and playing as the bus snaked its way through Aberdeenshire's winding country roads.

At the end of the journey, though, came *Last One Out* (★★★★★) by Scottish Opera's composer-in-residence Gareth Williams at the Museum of Scottish Lighthouses in far-flung Fraserburgh.

It divided the audience in half for a pair of connected supernatural scenes, spooky yet poignant, reuniting a lighthouse keeper and his daughter across the decades through a radio talk show.

Williams's radiant string score, at one point played by performers tucked in beside the lighthouse's spiral staircase, brought warmth and light to the building's chilly corners, and the two singers were beautifully understated yet powerful.

What took it to another level, though, was the joy of piecing together the work's two complementary stories – that, and the added resonance gained from the performance's remarkable venue.

**DAVID KETTLE**