

STRAUSS

Arabella

Review by Robert Thicknesse • Photography by Javier del Real

There is a lot going on in *Arabella*: romantic comedy meets fairytale love-story, with added trauma-study of a family and a society, and nods to operetta. It takes on three separate worlds, the Waldners' rickety life, the Cabbies' Ball and the wilds of Mandryka's Croatian estates. Perhaps the director's real task is to decide how much of this to elide; you can probably take on only two genres fully without mixing the tone too much. And maybe this is why really successful stagings of this interesting piece are so rare: dialling down one or other aspect means that some bits of the opera simply aren't going to work very well. And that's even before the massive particular influence of a conductor and singers.

Christof Loy's popular production has been around the houses, and is (for this director) a fairly straight take on the

matter. He sets it in the 20th century – the dresses are basically elegant Fifties: the particular social neurosis of the 1860 Vienna setting is replaced by a similar backward glance, asking how the blithe but decadent recent past impacts the present (though that particular transfer isn't particularly enlightening here). In any case the idea of a decayed aristocracy trying to shore up its fortunes by marketing an eligible daughter works pretty well in all eras.

It's a slow-burn piece, and you can spend a lot of time wondering who or what, precisely, we are supposed to be interested in – while enjoying the process inordinately as Strauss goes through his repertoire of conjuring up heart-melting music that the situation doesn't seem to quite merit. It could be a problem of sympathy: Zdenka, the obvious recipient in the early stages, is a bit too frazzled to win

the heart, even though hers is obviously in the right place. Arabella herself takes a while to come into focus as the heroine.

The Teatro Real really did it proud, with conductor David Afkham leading a wholehearted orchestra through all the nuances of Strauss' opulent, fluent score, an unending river of music that springs no particular surprises – but with Strauss in this vein you don't really need any. Everyone knows there are uninspired stretches, but they are so professionally done you hardly care, and if you sometimes feel a bit too close to Max Steiner's torrential music to the film *Now, Voyager* – well, Strauss was Steiner's actual godfather, *Arabella* is surely among Steiner's models, and in many ways it feels like a period romantic film drama by other means. The house orchestra was on fabulous form, swoony, boisterous, dynamic, and those slimmed-down

Teatro Real Madrid, Spain

MUSIC ★★★★★
STAGING ★★★★★



Chaos ensues at the Cabbies' Ball



Josef Wagner (Mandryka) and Jacquelyn Wagner (Arabella).



Sarah Defrise (Zdenka), Jacquelyn Wagner (Arabella) and Matthew Newlin (Matteo)

passages for single instruments brilliantly strong and intimate.

Alarming for the Real, for this performance which was to be filmed, the prima donna Sara Jakubiak fell ill – but amazingly they snared Jacquelyn Wagner, a veteran of this staging, to step in at the last minute. Nobody would have known. She was stunning, with all the wistful poise and inner steel the character needs, growing (as Arabella must) into a genuinely touching figure, with her reasonable awareness of her situation – being sold to the highest bidder – balanced by her faith and her gracious way of dealing with the (perfectly presentable and sensitively played) suitors.

As noted above, Loy's staging tried to do everything, which muddies the focus, ramping up the neurosis of the ball and Act 3 confrontations. I'm not sure much good is served by Zdenka staggering about like a bomb survivor, or Mandryka being quite so overfriendly with Fiakermilli, or Adelaide getting frisky with everyone, but as we know, the audience is rarely allowed to infer things for itself these days. Nonetheless, Josef Wagner's Mandryka had the right romantic hero stuff, Sarah Defrise as Zdenka blended beautifully with Arabella, Martin Winkler and Anne Sophie von Otter hammed it up nicely without being particularly funny as the Waldners, and Matthew Newlin manfully performed the punchbag role of poor old Matteo. ON