



FIRST NIGHT | OPERA

Migrations review — slaves, seasickness and space combine in ambitious opera

Wales Millennium Centre, Cardiff

• NEW

Rebecca Franks

Thursday June 30 2022, 12.00pm,
The Times

Brittany Olivia Logan, one of the standouts in a good cast
CRAIG FULLER

★★★★☆

Freedom! This is the stirring cry that opens *Migrations*, a new opera that's big-hearted, boldly ambitious, flawed but ultimately enjoyable. It's the latest creation from Welsh National Opera and was originally commissioned for the 400th anniversary of the *Mayflower* in 2020, but thanks to the pandemic its premiere is somewhat belated. No matter. Its vast theme — the impact of migration across multiple historical eras, in both the human and animal worlds — is as timely now as then.

Will Todd is the composer for *Migrations* and deserves much credit, but this ambitious undertaking also bears the hallmarks of its director David Pountney's adventurous and idealistic spirit. Who else would imagine an opera that encompasses everything from migratory birds to seasick pilgrims, First Nation anti-fossil fuel campaigners to space-exploring astronauts, the barbarity of the slave trade to the life-saving contributions of Indian doctors to the NHS? There is a lot going on here. Especially when you consider that six (excellent) writers are involved in the libretto: Pountney, Edson Burton, Miles Chambers, Eric Ngalle Charles, Shreya Sen-Handley and Sarah Woods.

The material is rich enough to spawn six complete operas, but instead four of the stories are chopped up and woven together across the work, a technique Pountney used for Peter Maxwell Davies's protest opera *Kommilitonen!*, while two others form the focus of each half. It's an effective way of generating meaning and momentum from vignettes, and just about stops the pace from sagging — though at times the second half could be tauter. The narrative layering is reflected in the smart staging: each story has its own physical space, but characters soon spill over into each other's worlds as the timelines merge and mix. If *Migrations'* points are sometimes too simplistically made, the totality captures the complexity of its subject.

Todd has his work cut out providing a diverse yet unifying musical language — and he does a grand job. Whether it's the off-kilter harpsichord underpinning the 18th-century slave owners' dinner party, luscious strings evoking the beauty of the natural world or the flute echoing the freewheeling birds (a bright children's chorus who amusingly sing of "stupid people"), the score is full of deft touches. Jasdeep Singh Degun provides sitar music for the whirling Bollywood section, and gospel singers (the Renewal Choir) join the WNO Chorus. Natasha Agarwal's Neera and Brittany Olivia Logan's Bridget stand out in a good cast, with the WNO orchestra on fine form, conducted by Matthew Kofi Waldren. A testament to the power of multicultural collaboration, *Migrations* pulses with life.

In Cardiff to July 2, then on tour from October 2 to November 26, wno.org.uk