

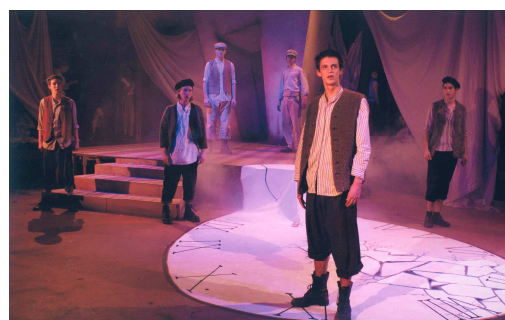
Review of Yerma
at Jags on the 9th December 2004



Yerma, one of Lorca's most harrowing and poetic plays, explores the eponymous heroine's agonizing and desperate yearning for a child. Not an obvious, rip-roaring choice for this year's senior school production, of the nature of Cabaret, but one that left a deep, haunting impression on the audience.

The sounds of water and a rippling blue lighting effect playing across the stark hanging drapes and distorted, angled doorway of Will Feasey's set drew us into the lyrical, at times dream-like, world of the play. We were further transported to the hot dust of rural Spain when Yerma, played exquisitely by Shakia Stewart, moved downstage, almost among the audience and, in a dazzling yellow spotlight, proceeded to run sand rhythmically between her fingers.

Rhythm is key in this play, and this was caught brilliantly through the interspersing of large ensemble sequences involving stylized movement and song, and intimate set pieces involving two or three characters, often underscored by atmospheric Spanish music, both recorded and live. The cast of girls and several boys from Dulwich College, managed to sustain a heightened, concentrated performance style which gripped the audience and pulled us, almost viscerally, into Yerma's torment. Her growing isolation was brilliantly portrayed through the directors' choice to keep the ensemble on stage almost throughout the play.



We saw them subtly shift position to share gossip or a joke, or simply to watch as Yerma became more and more urgent in her desire for fulfilment. From this shifting ensemble we saw certain individuals emerge and then draw back at the end of their scenes.

Lucy Taylor's saucy Pagan Woman provided beautifully timed comic interludes. She somehow managed to convince us that she had two husbands and fourteen children and still had a roving eye for the men! Chloe Palmer gave a sensitive, well-judged performance as Yerma's friend, Maria. One of my favourite scenes was when the gossiping women of the village gathered at the river, represented by a billowing blue cloth.

Their quips and accusations were delivered with great character and variety, from the raunchy heartiness of Jessica Clark, through the deep-voiced pronouncements of Rhian Davies to the softer, gentler tones of Katya Milavic-Davies. Another highly effective scene saw Yerma, in her desperation, seeking help from Dolores and her women, played beautifully by Kate Craggs, Alice Thomas and Flora Baker.



There were powerful moments, too when the boys took centre stage; for example, when they sang, 'Why do you sleep alone, shepherd?' accompanied by the soulful strains of the musicians' oboe and violin. The dark presence of Yerma's sisters-in-law, played dramatically by Anna Coghlan and Clare Wilman, like two demon crows hovering in wait, provided a powerful contrast to the visual richness and vigour of the rest of the ensemble. Zac Russell as Victor and Ed Boulle as Juan gave contrasting performances in their respective roles of romantic but unattainable love-interest and jealous, uncomprehending husband.

Russell brought a lightness of touch to Victor while Ed Boulle came into his own during his angry exchanges with Yerma as he feels she is slipping away from him.

At the other end of the scale, there were delightful, poised performances from the very youthful Jessie Kolvin and Oliver Norton-Smith.

But, despite the force of the ensemble and the coherence in the design of the whole production, the final word has to go to Shakia, who managed to take Yerma from sparkling, earnest hopefulness to bitter disappointment and despair. As the play reached its tragic climax, with the earthy musical beat building the tension and the chorus breathing together, reflecting Yerma's inner turmoil, we watched in disbelief as she fought and killed Juan in a crumpled heap on the floor and the lights gradually faded to the sound of her strangled sobbing.

Helen Adie