

A bit more than a threepenny opera

PIN MONEY OPERA
Battersea Arts Centre

There aren't many operas where all the action takes place in a flat in an East End tower block. But *Pin Money Opera*, as its name suggests, owes more to the traditions of old Bert Brecht than to those of Mozart or Wagner.

It's one of those curious modern hybrids that uses some of the formal musical and theatrical conventions of grand opera to tell a deliberately mundane little story of contemporary life.

Eileen shares a flat with David, but while she wants to be both mother and lover to him, alas, all she's ever going to be is his elder sister. And while she sews wedding dresses to make money to give to him for piano lessons, he goes out and spends it enjoying the professional services of the local tart.

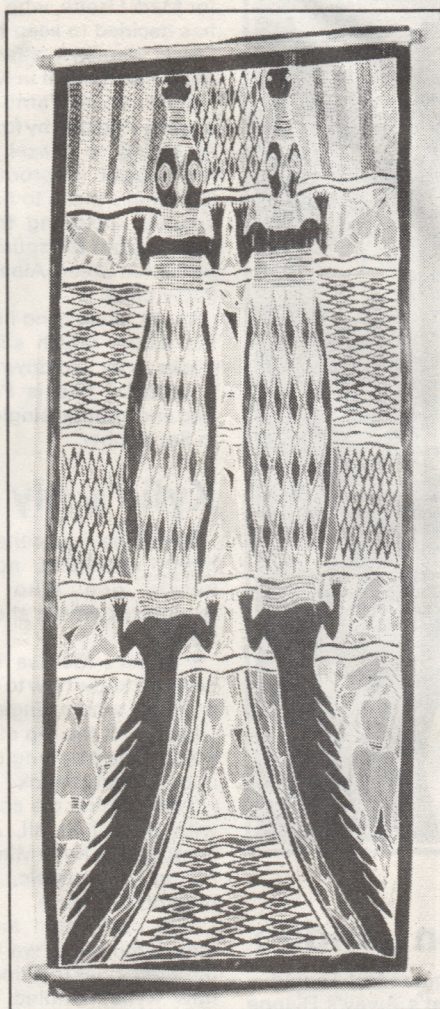
As a straight play the story would allow an opportunity to wrestle with all kinds of happy moral conundrums — not to mention the chance to tease the audience by weaving in a whole couch-full of clever Freudian symbolism. The operatic format, however, makes this rather difficult. With all the songs going on, there just isn't the time to develop any of the characters and what we learn of the plot has to be squeezed into sudden bursts of explanatory dialogue before the music starts up again.

Having said that, there are occasions where everything does come together. The slightly jarring, discordant music of Australian composer Warren Wills appropriately conveys both the claustrophobic setting of the small high-rise flat, and the turmoil going on inside the head of poor, crazy Eileen. Though one does feel at times that his artistic integrity would not have been completely forfeit had he interrupted the relentless grind of piano, flute and cello to insert a few more bars of lighter melodic relief.

Most successful of all, however, is the perfectly integrated four-person chorus. Through a mixture of singing and chattering lines they cleverly describe everything that's going on in the background, from the machinations of the anonymous neighbours to Eileen's paranoid auditory hallucinations. They even get a chance to put on wedding dresses and dance about as the eight-legged incarnation of Eileen's guilt-ridden conscience.

Taking opera onto the fringe circuit is a highly ambitious project and while *Pin Money Opera* is not without its problems, especially with the storyline, the Babel group of singers and musicians are clearly a very talented bunch of people. One looks forward to their next project.

Arthur Berman



Aboriginal designs

Scottish art, Scandinavian art, Russian art, Aboriginal art: every year or so up comes a new fad in the art world. It's always accompanied by a lot of media hype — then a few people make a few deals and the whole crazy circus moves on to find another gimmick to plug.

Fortunately, away from all the froth, there are the galleries who have a real commitment to the art they show.

The Rebecca Hossack Gallery was one of the first to promote Aboriginal art in this country and they've continued over the years to show a whole range of exhibitions from the familiar dot paintings to batiks, carvings and bark paintings (like the one above: Crocodile by Shakuwal Yunupinju).

Now, bringing everything together, Rebecca Hossack is presenting *Songlines*, a major exhibition covering all aspects of modern and historical Aboriginal culture.

The show runs from August 1 until September 4 at the Barbican Concourse Gallery, Barbican Centre, Silk Street EC2 (071-638 4141), Mon - Sat 10.00am - 7.30pm, Sun 12.00 - 7.30pm.

Three shades of the colour blue

SPUNK
Royal Court Theatre

One of the things that makes Zora Neale Hurston a renowned author — paving the way for Alice Walker and many other female American Southern writers — is that she doesn't just capture the poverty and racism of the South during the 1920s and '30s, she always burrows deeper, attempting to explore what lies within her characters: love, jealousy, pettiness, spiritual grandeur.

She asserts that although life may hold cruelty and bitterness for many, a person's spirit is only bound by self-forged fetters.

When George C Wolfe adapted three of Hurston short stories into *Spunk* (first performed by the New York Shakespeare Festival Production) he undoubtedly ran the risk of losing Hurston's subtle spirituality. Pages of literary analysis were destined to fall flat under the weight of the spotlight. Nevertheless, *Spunk* retains Hurston's themes and adds all of the suffering, cruelty, triumph, humour, love and hot blues music needed to bring great stories to life.

The three different playlets share two narrators, Guitar Man and Blues Speak Woman, who intersperse the stories with brilliant vocals. Songs like *I'm too good looking for you*, and *You bring out the boogie in me* sound just great.

The first story, *Sweet* is about a husband who has found a new, fat woman to replace his overworked boney wife. To help initiate the change, he introduces a rattlesnake into the house. It's a classic bluesy story — I work so hard, my man treats me bad and I'll be so glad when he's gone.

Next comes a hilarious portrayal of two Harlem pimps. Decked out in their zoot suits they try to hustle their charms for money and meals. It seems that that generation is the only one that can still sound cool when saying lines like, 'Baby, I am quick death and easy judgment', or 'Like the farmer to the potato — I plant you now and dig you later.'

Finally, the last skit is about a naive, happily married couple that gets torn apart when a big-wheeling, flashy hustler, who wears gold like a white man, seduces the wife.

In these stories men betray women, women betray men, blacks betray blacks and everyone fears white men's cruelty. But the plays never fall into the trap of blaming others for personal flaws.

Spunk explores American racism, black culture and personal relationships in a way that demonstrates well what lies behind the blues in everyone's life: 'a little sweat, a little pain, a little blood and a little spunk.'

Christy McFall