

Lindy, Opera Australia

Reviewed by Peter McCallum
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Opera Theatre, Opera House, October 25

As a parable of our time, Moya Henderson's *Lindy* is an uncomfortable triumph. Uncomfortable in that it chronicles the grotesque feeding-frenzy that devoured Lindy Chamberlain after the death of her daughter, Azaria, in 1980.

Uncomfortable also in the stark and terrifying dualities through which Henderson and librettist Judith Rodriguez chronicle it: an innocent grieving mother against an obsessed prosecution (goaded by a grotesque "dingo" chorus of media mongrels), and the spirit-lore of Uluru against a perverted law of white courts.

And also uncomfortable in the mirror it holds up to us.

We can laugh, cry or be angry, but this actually happened, here, not so long ago, and all the victims except one are still with us.

Much of the triumph belongs to Joanna Cole, warm-voiced and strong.

Cole creates a dignity around the character of Lindy that grows in the face of injustice. But the whole cast shines.

David Hobson, singing with his customary attractive clarity is an affectionate Michael Chamberlain, Barry Ryan an implacable prosecutor and Elizabeth Campbell smooth-voiced and serene as an eventually triumphant defence council.

Dramatically, the work has not quite settled into a single unit (it is performed without interval). It has three effective movements of emphasis: the camp, the trial (both narrated through flashback from prison in Act One) and the commission of inquiry (related in real-time in Act Two). All three seemed cramped into one whole, making the denouement slightly extended.

The scene before the camp, set in Darwin prison the night before Chamberlain is asked to identify the matinee jacket that eventually vindicated her story, was more fragmented and dream-like and might have benefited from a stronger theatrical delineation between the prison events and the flashbacks.

Henderson's vocal style is instinctive and dramatically sure, soaring over a volatile instrumental part, enlivened by birdsong (particularly the paradoxically beautiful cry of the butcher bird), primitive repeats and effective textural variety.

It is music that changes gear often. Highly sensitive to shifts of dramatic pace, it never shies from the simplest, most direct gestures for its purposes - and therein lies its dramatic success.

Conductor Richard Gill allowed the all-important vocal lines to speak with ease and a sense of natural breath.

Some of the more exposed instrumental playing wore slightly thin - the chamber-styled ensemble did not always have chamber-like precision - but there was a tightness and pace that kept the drama alive.

Stuart Maunder's production is spare, even frugal by OA standards. Yet the staging was strong: anything more opulent could have distracted from the simple power of the work.

Some passages of text risked being almost too narrative: in Chamberlain's opening soliloquy, feeding her baby, and her closing monologue, one was reminded of the need in opera to be frugal with words.

It was the kind of narrative that would terrify a more cautious composer. Yet Henderson embraced the monstrous injustice with music that was attractive, alive, direct and telling.

Assisted by Cole's impressive dramatic presence, she was also able to swiftly generate dramatic tension of quite frightening proportions.

The campfire scene, full of knobbly knees and stubbies, became suddenly terrifying, not after any portentous build-up.

One sensed the ordinariness of the scene was about to turn to tragedy for the Chamberlains and for Australia.

Like its story, the opera has had a troubled birth with a healthy share of sceptics and scorners.

Henderson has nevertheless produced one of the strongest, most arresting pieces of Australian music drama I have seen, and emerges as a promising and distinctive new voice in this country's opera.

This is the expanded version of the review which appeared in some editions of the *Herald* on Saturday.

<http://www.smh.com.au/articles/2002/10/27/1035683304577.html>