

THE  TIMES

The Wind-Up Bird Chronicle at the King's Theatre



Bora Yoon leads the fabulous soundscapes and music that run through this world premiere staging Robbie Jack

Libby Purves

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A piece of theatre can be as odd, mad, surreal and episodic as it likes, provided it tells a story and makes you care. It can be alien, bilingual, semi-subtitled and cruel, provided it is beautiful. The director Stephen Earnhart's labour of love, a two-hour rendering of a long magical-realist novel by Haruki Murakami, is all of the above. One man near me kept sighing pointedly, but I happily rolled with it all the way. The Festival's eastern season has found a jewel: an asymmetric and strangely cut gem, but one which throws off beams of light.

New readers start here. Toru Okada, played with lovely decent naivety by James

Yaegashi, is jobless and stays at home folding laundry. His wife Kumiko has vanished, and so has his cat (called Noboru Wataya, after his rich, smug, fascist politician brother-in-law, though they dislike him and plan to change the cat's name to Mackerel). Toru lives half in mundane modern reality, half in a visionary dreamworld of huge symbols such as dark wells, huge suns and water, evoked by puppetry and shadows and marvellous projection on to the sliding papery walls of his life. Everything relates to the real dilemmas of heart and spirit: his disembodied voice says that the way to see reality clearly is "to get as far away from it as possible".

Characters speak partly in American-accented English, and half in surtitled Japanese. Toru encounters an unsolicited phone-sex caller, a bossy prostitute (Stacey Yen) whose soul was sucked out by the villain, and a freakish teenager obsessed with death. An old soldier who grows flowers at Hiroshima turns up and relates wartime atrocities, hard to take even in surtitles. Bursts of malicious Japanese TV prank-shows echo those unforgotten sadisms. Kumiko reappears, monochrome, projected on the fishtank after the politician's bodyguard has been surreptitiously eating the dried catfood. Fabulous soundscapes and music run through, composed and led (in a wild feather cockade) by Bora Yoon. At one point she plays *Auld Lang Syne*.

But Yaegashi's Toru is a modern Everyman to love, not least in his central fear that he does not truly know his wife because we all have too many "secret rooms" in us to connect properly. The plot finally makes sense, in a shamelessly airport-thriller way. That, and the beauty and emotional honesty beneath the weirdness, is why it works. The bird, by the way, is one whose cry sounds like clockwork. Toru imagines that its job is to wind up the spring of the universe.

Box office: 0131-473 2000, to Wed.

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