



Reviews

Irish Times reviewers check out *The Farmleigh Affair* at Farmleigh House in Dublin, *The RTE Concert Orchestra* at the National Concert Hall in Dublin and *Love Letters* at the Mill Theatre in Dundrum, Dublin.

The Farmleigh Affair , Farmleigh House, Dublin

With its weekend festival programme slashed in half due to the bad weather, the Farmleigh Affair was hell-bent on making their single-day event a raging success, and the sunshine that greeted the crowds in the early Monday afternoon hinted that it was there to stay, at least for a while.

Hebridean Island singer Julie Fowles was the ultimate yin to the Spooky Men's Chorale yang. Her refined and gracious song repertoire was succeeded by an unlikely 10-strong legion of Antipodeans, populated, it seemed, by the motley scions of a Kazakh goat herder, a Cuban revolutionary, Audie Murphy, Abraham Lincoln, Hill Street Blues' Mick (aka Animal), a Nebraskan woodcutter, Roberto Benigni - and Biggles. Evidently schooled in the Stanislavski method, the Spooky Men championed the power of pointless grandeur, and tickled their rapt audience with such life-enhancing gems as Am I Not Pretty Enough?, Don't Stand Between a Man and His Tool and the mother of all protest songs, Stop Scratching It, You're Only Making It Worse. High camp, epic folly: probably the best programming choice of the entire summer festival circuit.

After all that surrealism, Dobet Gnahoré elevated the bar magnificently with her musical acrobatics, cross fertilising her cavernous Ivory Coast vocals with powerhouse percussion and dance steps that bear closer kinship to Olympian gymnastics than to the ramrod boogie with which we're more closely acquainted in Irish music. At times veering towards the easy-listening end of African music, Gnahoré's gloriously resonant voice and irresistible charisma lured even the champagne quaffers to the front-stage dance floor before her set was finished.

Damien Dempsey launched himself unto the by now, rain-soaked crowd with a power hose of reggae beats. Your Pretty Smile, Apple Of My Eye and Teachers had a swathe of his loyal fans lip-syncing from the get-go.

Finally, Macedonia's Kocani Orkestar made a valiant effort to spin dry what was left of the sodden audience with extracts from their infamous Borat soundtrack, their brand of driving Balkan brass finding a surprisingly diverse fan base. In the best spirit of democracy, this was music of the people, for the people - festival programming that puts some of our bigger concert promoters in the shade. - **Siobhán Long**

Brady, O'Doherty, RTÉCO/Brophy, NCH, Dublin

This lunchtime programme under principal conductor David Brophy encompassed a wide range of accessible 20th-century works. Two were by Irish composers with radically different ideas about their national style.

Deirdre Brady (flute) and Geraldine O'Doherty (harp) took centre-stage for the copious solo swirls of Hamilton Harty's fantasy In Ireland. This dream-like music vaguely recalls slow airs, marches and reels, yet these are subjugated to a general mood of sophisticated impressionism. Brady returned to give a slick performance of Bill Whelan's Dance of the Morrighu. Here, the clean orchestral backdrop is indebted to minimalism, but from it emerge shapely tunes that remain upliftingly true to Irish traditional forms.

In stark urban contrast was the suite for wind and brass from Kurt Weill's Threepenny Opera. Though it includes some of his most familiar songs, they're not best served by a wordless presentation. While the celebrated Mack the Knife might have been more supple, the Ballad of the Easy Life developed an idiomatically comic tone, and Polly's Song admitted some charming woodwind solos. For Manuel de Falla's Ritual Fire Dance, the woods had conjured up appropriately Moorish effects against an especially rich string sound. But Brophy's moderate tempo and close attention to details kept the flames too much under control.

With the super-smooth ebb and flow of Sibelius's Valse Triste, however, the conductor really showed how flexible, persuasive and compelling his direction of this orchestra can be. - **Andrew Johnstone**

Love Letters , Mill Theatre, Dundrum

America's upper-middle class, for which the acronym WASP (White Anglo-Saxon Protestant)

is often used, provides the soil in which AR Gurney has nurtured his many plays. Love Letters has been doing the rounds for near 20 years now, often featuring celebrity actors in its two roles. Here, Bryan Murray and Una Crawford O'Brien create Andy and Melissa through monologues framed as intimate letters.

It begins with a note by Andy about a birthday party for Melissa, and continues into a succession of missives up to high school expressing boy-girl sentiments, tentative on his part, brash on hers. Her family has more money than his, but less stability, and she experiences parental divorce. She becomes fed up with Andy's lack of colour, his substitution of letters for life, including sex.

Later he joins the navy, while she is exploring Europe and taking an interest in painting. He has a torrid affair in Japan, but won't talk about it except to indicate that it was defeated by his traditions, duty to family and more of that good stuff. They get married - to others. Her life spirals down into alcoholism, psychiatric illness and defeat, while he plods on to a successful career in law and politics. They meet once for an explosive sexual encounter, after which he returns to his protected existence. His final letter is a kind of valedictory post mortem.

Directed by Joshua Edelman, the two actors sit on swivel chairs, talking their letters at each other. This static scenario drains the play of drama, but the players establish their characters successfully. Melissa is vivacious and open, and Una Crawford O'Brien plays her with colour, while Bryan Murray draws Andy in shades of grey. - **Gerry Colgan**

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