

# ARTISTIC ASSESSMENT FORM



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Please return the completed assessment to: [assessment@arts council.org.uk](mailto:assessment@arts council.org.uk)  
If you have any questions, please contact Claire Glasbey at [claire.glasbey@arts council.org.uk](mailto:claire.glasbey@arts council.org.uk) or 0121 631 5738.

<b>Name of Assessor:</b>	Antony Lewis-Crosby
<b>Organisation being assessed:</b>	Arcola Theatre/Grimeborn Opera Festival
<b>Title of artistic activity:</b>	Opera – Massenet's Werther
<b>Date:</b> <i>(if relevant)</i>	23 <sup>rd</sup> August 2014
<b>Venue:</b> <i>(if relevant )</i>	Arcola Theatre
<b>Time:</b> <i>(if relevant)</i>	7.30pm

## Context

*Please give details of the context you bring to this assessment. For example, your familiarity with the organisation's work, the piece of work being assessed or the artists involved. How familiar are you with the style/genre/sub-artform? Are you familiar with the venue or is it your first visit?*

The Grimeborn Opera Festival is well established as an alternative opera festival based at the Arcola Theatre in Dalston. This was my first experience of the Festival and for me was an amazing contrast to my previous opera experience at Glyndebourne the night before for Handel's Rinaldo. Both evenings were artistically very strong in contrasting ways.

What is not clear to me, even after some research, is whether the Grimeborn

Opera Festival and the Arcola Theatre are the same organisation. I am presuming that they are and so am reviewing both the performance and the venue.

### **1. The vision and execution of the work**

*Consider the quality of the ideas and the overall execution. You are welcome to compare it with the organisation's or artists' previous work if you are familiar with it, or with the work of others. Is it a revival of a previously created piece of work or newly commissioned? If you know the artists' work, does this piece show them exploring new techniques or subject matter? Is the work shown in a fresh context or new perspective? If it is familiar material, how well has it been executed?*

The Opera Festival is very broad based with operas from Monteverdi to the most contemporary and as well as their own productions, there are productions by other small opera companies. Massenet's Werther was one of the Festival's own productions. It is a rarely performed work on the big opera stages and so it was interesting to see it interpreted for such a small space. Clearly it was pared down for a cast of 4 – plus a very small singing part, an off stage singer and a silent actor. It was also accompanied just by a piano performing what would be a large scale 19<sup>th</sup> century orchestration.

### **2. The impact of the work**

*Did it communicate successfully to you? What impact did it have on you? If the aims for the piece of work are clearly stated in publicity material or accompanying programmes etc, were they achieved? Does the work make a contribution to development of the artform?*

I had not seen the opera before and the work made a big impact on me. The tragic story could not have failed to do so in such a small space and the production was very direct and the singing not necessarily and rightly reduced in volume. The impact on me was created from my arrival in the theatre with two of the cast holding a pose for a good 15 minutes before the performance started.

Living on the far side of London I had not seen advance publicity for the performance and the free programme was a very simple with a cast list and biogs.

### **3. The programming or curating of the work.**

*How does the work sit within the organisation's overall programme or catalogue and next to work created/presented/curated or published by others?*

As stated earlier the Grimeborn Opera Festival presents a wide range of operas in the theatre. Massenet's Werther is probably the largest scale work in the Festival and I felt that it was good to have such a work interpreted in this way. The depth of the tragedy comes across so powerfully and any relief that there would be in a large scale production was cut out, such as the children's choir singing the Christmas songs off stage as a background to Werther having shot himself and dying in front of his lover.

#### **4. The different artistic elements**

*Comment on the quality of the different elements as appropriate, such as the choreography, the script, the score, the installation, the direction, the structure, the language, the design, the conducting, the artworks, the balance of the programme, the soloists, the performances etc.*

All of the 4 soloists were excellent with a particular mention for both Adam Tunnicliffe as Werther and Katie Bray as Charlotte. Because there was no relief in the production both singers performed their roles with amazing intensity and Katie Bray's solo mad scene was outstanding. Both Lucy Knight (Sophie) and Simon Wallfisch (Albert) were very strong support singers with perhaps slightly less intensity. The silent ghost role of Charlotte's mother added a powerful intensity, but was possibly overused and sometimes seemed to get in the way of the slow moving action or not actually relate in production terms to the action. Still Ada Burke conveyed the role well.

There was no conductor for the performance, although the musical director was playing the piano in a corner of the stage area. Thus rehearsals had prepared the performers superbly. This was the 4<sup>th</sup> and final performance by the cast.

Philip Voldman was the Music Director and pianist and his performance was a tour de force. It is a huge score of Lisztian/Wagnerian proportions and to carry this off musically on the piano was amazing.

The performance was sung in French and the surtitles on screens were very clear to the vast majority of the audience.

#### **5. Production Standards**

*How good are the production standards? Lighting, sound, use of space, overall layout/hang, graphic design etc?*

Aylin Bozok's production worked very well in the small space. The only props were a white drape which was either part of Charlotte's dress or a canopy around her during her mad scene. The performers entered down the audience stairs into the space and exited through the corners of the stage into a backstage below. There was a sense of slow burner about the production building to a climax. However the slow burner is not meant in any derogatory sense as it was clear from the beginning that the opera would have a tragic ending.

Lighting was excellent and despite the small space and some of the lights at floor level right beside the audience very subtle.

The costumes were intended to be period French 19<sup>th</sup> century and looked very appropriate to the production.

#### **6. Audience**

*If you experienced the work in the presence of other people, how did they react? How long did they spend looking at the exhibition? Any other observations about their engagement with the work? If the work is written, how do you think readers will engage with it? Is its presentation appropriate?*

The theatre was completely sold out and the audience appeared to be totally engaged with the performance and the production. It was interesting to note the number of younger people in the audience, probably many from the local Dalston area familiar with the theatre's work. This type of Festival encourages a more relaxed audience – a complete contrast to the dressed up audience at Glyndebourne the night before.

#### **7. Are there any other aspects that you wish to comment on?**

N/A

#### **8. Customer care (if relevant)**

*How good and appropriate was the customer care that you experienced or observed? Areas you might want to comment on are: catering facilities, attitude of staff; access, signage, cleanliness etc.*

The Arcola theatre is clearly a very successful operation using an old building imaginatively. The bar is clearly part of a local focus as well as catering for the audiences for the 2 small theatres. I did not use the catering facilities, but it looked like good quality bar food.

I am sure that Arcola is an important part of the cultural life of the Dalston area which does not have that many other cultural facilities.