

OPERA

The Alma Fetish

By Raymond Deane and Gavin Kostick
National Concert Hall
Reviewed by **Dick O'Riordan**

The Alma Fetish seemed to be turning into the Alma curse when the start of this world premiere of Derry composer Raymond Deane's new work was delayed while orchestra and audience awaited a replacement for a malfunctioning oboe. Opera first nights are notoriously accident-prone.

However, the "curse" proved a blessing in disguise, as Deane and conductor Fergus Sheil used waiting time to explain the background of the bizarre love affair between Gustav Mahler's widow, the gorgeous Alma, and the painter Oskar Kokoschka.

When the affair ended, Oskar had an Alma doll surrogate made which he brought everywhere – even by carriage to the opera. This may now seem humorous, even hilarious, but the Alma fetish was an all-consuming affliction that was – in a word – operatic.

This telling by Deane and Gavin Kostick was riveting, even in its limited concert staging which, though lacking costumes and sets, was embellished by screen projections of period-style artwork by Pauline Bewick (who first suggested the subject matter). Kostick's libretto was vivid and tight as a drum.

Compelling singing by British tenor Leigh Melrose enthralled and it was impossible not to feel compassion for Oskar, who was essentially a total oddball. The intensely emotional force of Melrose's performance, revealed the pain of a human being deeply wounded in body and soul. The two other main characters, Alma (Majella Cullagh) and Hulda (Daire Halpin), the maid who suggested the companion doll and eventually exorcised the fetish with Oskar in a bath tub, also sang superbly. Halpin's high-soaring soprano voice contrasted effectively with Cullagh's luscious timbre and flexibility.

Deane's score allowed hints of traditional aria format – excepting a substantial quote from Wagner's ecstatic Liebestod which was integral to the story.

Despite the weird plot, Deane's music was forceful and dynamic in the hands of the RTE National Symphony Orchestra. I suspect nothing on Ireland's opera stage, north or south, this year will equal this remarkable achievement.

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Niall Buggy in The Hanging Gardens

Sam himself hovers between lucidity and madness, with an eloquent tongue that delivers tender comforts one minute and devastating cruelty the next. His formidable wife Jane is a successful writer of what he patronisingly calls 'How to Garden shite' and seems more interested in plants than her children. These include Rachel, a pregnant barrister just back from Dublin; college drop-out Maurice, who has returned to mend a broken heart; and dutiful stay-at-home Charlie,

whose resentments are gradually bubbling to the surface.

McGuinness gives his story a classical framework by naming the house Babylon, but the best dialogue here is entirely naturalistic. "You are going mad," Jane tells her scheming husband at one point, "and you will not be content until you drive us that way or you drive us apart." Among a sterling cast, Niall Buggy is magnificent as the fading storyteller who shambles around his vale of tears in a cardi-

gan while providing poignant glimpses of the force of nature he must once have been.

Compared to McGuinness's more epic works such as the classic *Observe the Sons of Ulster Marching Towards the Somme*, *The Hanging Gardens* feels like a small-scale piece of theatre. It still impresses as a perfectly formed miniature, funny and moving by turns – and a vivid reminder of what most families eventually have to face whether they know it or not.

ers' plight that fails to convince



Alan Howley as Tom and Caitriona Ní Mhurchú as Vera

tirely believable, nor is it meant to be. The play's writers and directors, Christine Molloy and Joe Lawlor – who also work extensively in film, video and multimedia – continuously draw attention to the constructed nature of what is happening.

Tom and Vera are preparing for a performance, rehearsing and put-

ting on costumes, make-up and wigs.

The set reminds the audience that they are in a theatre. Lights and screens are visible. A bird sits on a branch and a fox stands to one side – they look stuffed. Tom and Vera address the creatures directly: these are awkwardly contrived scenes even in a play that wishes to draw

attention to its contrivances.

The characters' jokes are similarly jarring. "It's not easy remembering all the lines, you know," Tom says to Vera at one point. Part of the problem is that the play is not a tragicomedy and its attempts at humour, like the Brechtian techniques it employs, upend its chances of fostering any real emotional investment in the characters.

As the robbery takes place off-stage, Janyce Condon stands in front of the set and sings Liebestod from Wagner's *Tristan und Isolde*. There are numerous other portents, a couple of them biblical, so many in fact that they contribute to the play's laboriousness. It's a shame, because there are some fine moments, mainly when Alan Howley (Tom) and Caitriona Ní Mhurchú (Vera) are freed from the more stilted demands of the script and allowed to depict the base desperation of a middle-aged couple reduced to pauperism. The most moving sequences are also the most naturalistic.