

'Kismet' at the ENO: An exercise in very poor taste

In these straitened times, opera houses need to bring in the crowds. But with its bangles, baubles and belly-dancing, 'Kismet' is the worst choice for the ENO.

By Jessica Duchon

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Kismet: it's all about fate. And it's the title of a blockbuster musical set in ancient Baghdad, with music consisting of borrowed, bowdlerised, Broadwayised Borodin. This hybrid honey-monster of a show is about to open at the Coliseum with an all-star line-up, having not been staged in the capital for nearly 30 years. It seems a strange fate indeed for English National Opera.

When it was first performed in 1953, Kismet was a runaway success; it was soon turned into a film starring Howard Keel and Ann Blyth. But since then it has never enjoyed the high profile of Carousel or Oklahoma!, let alone West Side Story. Unlike those musicals - organic dramas with fine music created to fit them - Kismet's score is a hotchpotch plundering of prefabricated tunes, while its action romps through a stereotypical medieval Middle East. It's a fairly unsatisfactory collage, and today it risks looking tasteless at best, and tactless at worst.

So what is it doing here? ENO has been through a long shaky patch, despite the shiny refit of its magnificent theatre, and money - or lack of it - is the root cause. State subsidy in Britain is habitually inadequate, sponsorship is vital and box-office takings must be maximised; inevitably, priorities can turn commercial. ENO has notched up some significant artistic brownie points this season, especially for Britten's Death in Venice featuring Ian Bostridge, and the London premiere of Philip Glass's Satyagraha, sung in Sanskrit, and brought in by an outside production company. It also dipped a toe into Broadway waters in 2005 by staging Leonard Bernstein's On the Town, which was enthusiastically received.

That, though, was different. On the Town has a fabulous original score and it benefited from ENO's operatic capacities at every level. It was infinitely more satisfying than, for example, a West End theatre production a few years ago of West Side Story, in which neither the accompanying band nor the singers were able to do full justice to Bernstein's hefty technical demands.

The line often blurs between opera and musicals, in any case. Bernstein and the choreographer Jerome Robbins set out to employ in *West Side Story* the same artistic standards as an opera or ballet. Earlier, Jerome Kern's *Showboat* tackled the serious issue of racism that was rare amid Broadway's escapist fluff; and on the operatic side, Gershwin brought melodies more characteristic of opera into his magnum opus, *Porgy and Bess*. And there's *Carmen Jones*, which takes over the Royal Festival Hall this summer - a 19th-century opera recast as a 20th-century musical, yet entirely faithful to Bizet's original.

The *Kismet* publicity material declares that this show's eclectic blend of Broadway and Borodin, with a big chorus and lots of dancing, is ideal for the company. That's not the problem, though: *Kismet* is an all-American take on Baghdad and its staging couldn't have been more inappropriately timed if it tried. Perhaps a rethink could have produced a solution: why not do Borodin's *Prince Igor* instead? It contains many of the same tunes, a big chorus and lots of dancing - and is rarely performed (the last time in Britain was at Covent Garden, more than a decade ago).

It's worth noting, moreover, that Alexander Borodin (1833-1887), a Russian chemist-turned-composer, was a member of the group of composers known as "The Five" or "The Mighty Handful". They shared ideals about shaking off the shackles of Western musical mores and filled their works with Russian timbres and melodies derived from the country's folk music. Their aim, in short, was to create Russian art music.

Borodin has never been as celebrated as his colleague Rimsky-Korsakov, but he did have a gift for a good tune. *Prince Igor* brims with inspiration and its ballet section, the "Polovetsian Dances", has become his most recognisable work. His memorable, mellifluous, exotic-sounding compositions proved rich pickings for the creators of *Kismet*, Robert Wright and George Forrest, who seized on what they perceived as Borodin's multi-purpose orientalism as a complement for their Middle Eastern setting. But the all-Russian Borodin would probably have had some strong opinions about that - not to mention the fact that his music was being stolen and corrupted, to the benefit of someone else's bank account.

He wouldn't have found much comfort in the lyrics, either. Written by Charles Lederer and Luther Davis, they are based on the 1911 play by Edward Knoblock. There's a poet, a Caliph, an innocent young girl, and a sexy harem wife named Lalume. The original play is reputedly quite good, but the words to *Kismet*'s songs are sickly enough to make *Turkish Delight* taste sugar-free. Borodin's best-known melody from the "Polovetsian Dances" becomes the duet "Take my hand, I'm a stranger in paradise". The gorgeous slow movement of the Second String Quartet is reinvented as "And this is my beloved". A melody from the quartet's scherzo becomes a number called "Baubles, bangles and beads". And a fierce

"Polovetsian Dance" blends with big-band jazz to declare that "Not since Nineveh" has there been such a great city as Baghdad.

There's still a shred of hope as far as the drama is concerned. Writer Kit Hesketh-Harvey and Luther Davis himself are adapting the words for this production. Hopefully the rewrite will lessen both the datedness and the cringe factors; ideally it should move the story's home city to - well, preferably somewhere not recently blasted to pieces by the US and Britain.

If that isn't the case, then almost any other classic musical would have been a better choice for ENO just at the moment. Why not *West Side Story* or *Candide*, both worthy Bernstein candidates? *Showboat* could also be magnificent. The company does require a new *raison d'être*, moving on from its mantra of opera in English, and it will need to experiment. It has had triumphs in the past with new operas by Judith Weir and Mark-Anthony Turnage; today, it would be more than justified in staging, cheek by jowl, a contemporary success like Thomas Adès's *Powder Her Face* and Bernstein's *West Side Story*. By all means, mix and match challenging operas and the occasional good, well-chosen musicals. But the emphasis should be on "good" and "well-chosen".

Kismet should still be a terrific night out, if this kind of show floats your boat. In the leading roles are Michael Ball, flavour of the month in the West End and the Proms alike; Alfie Boe, the former car-mechanic tenor darling of Classic FM; and the Broadway star Faith Prince, appearing in London for the first time, as Lalume. The orchestra, more used to the challenges of Verdi and Janacek, is conducted by the esteemed maestro Richard Hickox, while the musicals specialist Simon Lee is associate conductor and the award-winning Gary Griffin directs.

But given all this, the baubles, bangles and Broadway stars of *Kismet* are probably commercial enough not to need public subsidy. It's a sobering thought that the show's share of ENO's Arts Council grant could have been put towards very different ends. For instance, the taxpayers' money might have helped to commission some new chamber operas from young composers needing development opportunities; to support cultural exchanges between British musicians and some from the real Middle East; to help find the best young British singers; or to subsidise free or cheap tickets for young people to see an opera for the first time. Those, after all, are the real strangers in paradise. If *Kismet* does represent a new direction, it's not a comfortable one.

'Kismet', Coliseum, London WC2 (0870 145 0200), 25 June to 14 July