

First Night: Anna Nicole, Royal Opera House

Sex, drugs and rock'n'roll opera as the larger-than-life lady sings

By Jessica Duchen

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LAURIE LEWIS 'Anna Nicole' at the Royal Opera House

Her image grins down on the auditorium from a medallion beside Queen Victoria; and the proscenium itself is as false as the great silicone boobs of Anna Nicole Smith herself, shocking pink, every crest and symbol transformed and possessed by her. So began the most hotly anticipated night in contemporary opera in years.

The sorry history of Anna Nicole Smith, the one-time Playboy model with her "breathtaking, breast-faking life" – her gluttonous appetites, the aged billionaire husband and a tragic family story ending in her own grisly death – has been transformed into an operatic parable for our times by two of new opera's most exciting and controversial figures, composer Mark-Anthony Turnage and librettist Richard Thomas. And it's been hyped to the point at which expectation becomes very difficult to match with reality.

Shocking it isn't; stunning it is. No, you don't see the oral sex scene ("There ain't no such thing as a free ranch" ...), but you do see the humanity. Eva-Maria Westbroek is a startlingly innocent Anna, caught in demonic forces (Gerald Finley as lawyer Stern) beyond her control.

Director Richard Jones surrounds our heroine and her accoutrements with observers at every turn. At first the chorus is always there, prying, observing, recording, broadcasting... but gradually as the nightmare encroaches, all that is left is a swarm of black and silent cameras, doing what cameras do. No judgement on Anna Nicole, but all on how the celebrity-hungry public saw her, while accepting the manic commercial manipulation of her every move.

Richard Thomas's libretto would carry the day even if the score weren't as terrific as it is: varied, acidic, lyrical and occasionally heartbreaking. The death of Anna's son, Daniel (Dominic Rowntree), who sings only to utter the names of all the drugs he's been stuffed with, is suitably devastating; Anna's lament harkens more than a little to Purcell's Dido.

With Tony Pappano in the driving seat, the orchestra and jazz band together pack a punch in Turnage's rhythmic score, punching out the jazz and blues enhancing the edgy but somehow edible atonality that is so characteristic of him.

It's a tremendous show, fast-paced, spare and concentrated, tagged with references such as Marshall (a passionate, warm-voiced Alan Oke) as an armchair deus ex machina, and replete with layers of laughter and lighting of imagination and colourful wonders – accolades to Mimi Jordan Sherin and D M Wood for this last. The chorus relishes its wordy, busy brilliance; the soloists give their all, and if Westbroek could perhaps be even more extreme in her characterisation then perhaps she will grow into that as the run proceeds. It's a peach of a role, and must be a tad scary to perform for the first time.

"The party always ends," mourns Anna's mother, the opera's voice of reason and prophecy, sung by the fabulous Susan Bickley, over the dying form of Marshall, who exits the life he so loved in a gold suit while wishing that Anna may never grow into decrepitude. She doesn't. And the party's end is grim.

Right topic, right time: Anna Nicole overtly puts America on trial: it reminds us that we had it all, but we threw it away. She's not only a tragic heroine: she's the rise and fall of Western excess itself. The only trouble is that perhaps this opera knows that nearly too well.