

British Theatre Guide

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Ben and Imo

Mark Ravenhill

Royal Shakespeare Company

Orange Tree Theatre

19 April–17 May 2025

Can creative genius be forgiven for bad behaviour, verbal abuse, for toxic entitlement, for childish petulance? It seems so if you're Benjamin Britten. Who would know about appeasing and aiding a great man if not Imogen Holst, eccentric, "free spirit" daughter of Gustav (Gussie she calls him) Holst?

Both protagonists in this volatile two-hander by Mark Ravenhill, originally written to mark the centenary of Britten's birth and performed on BBC Radio 3 in 2013 then taken up [last year by the RSC](#), where it received rave reviews, are outstanding in a capricious *pas de deux*.

Maybe I should not be using a dance term, as Britten had nothing good to say about Ninette de Valois or Frederick Ashton, or Vaughn Williams, or Kenneth Clark—uses the 'c' word about him—quite liberal with his vernacular in his tantrum fits. What a bitch.

But it wouldn't be Ravenhill, who also takes pot shots at the Arts Council (the Orange Tree Theatre has no funding) and the 'dull' royal family, without it. "Stuff the queen and fuck the duke of Edinburgh" he puts in Imo's mouth. Ben worries about "piss pots" in Elizabethan times.

Superlatives all round: wonderfully written (a piece of turbulent music, one might call it) with much wit, humour (jokes about Wagner, "coqs" and "vin"), arc, pace and bite; astonishingly honed, subtly vibrant performances from Victoria Yeates and Samuel Barnett; brilliant staging (director Erica Whyman excels, as do designer Soutra Gilmour, lighting designer Charles Balfour and composer Conor Mitchell).

And movement by Lucy Cullingford—Imo demonstrates a galliard (it gets spontaneous applause) rather well (I once did a course in Renaissance dance), for Ben is writing an opera, [Gloriana](#), for the new queen's coronation. Dancing around the grand piano in the centre of the tiny space, her plain brown outfit lit up by her dazzling smile, Imo is a bird on the wing—incidentally, much taken by the flocks outside. Very much her own person, a hyper, generous personality with no filter... one could easily fall for her, yet she never married.

The poor, insecure man is stressed out of his skull—hence the bad behaviour—he has nine months to write the opera. Has he taken the commission out of duty or honour? Imo has been sent to be his musical assistant—though her title and role are unclear—after much discussion. His nanny more like—and the petulant, spoilt brat needs one. Hugs, too. Is the tale of Elizabeth I and the Earl of Essex suitable for the new young queen? He had cause to worry—it wasn't a critical success at the time—maybe he overthought it...

Nor is she being paid ("no remuneration," she shouts), living a frugal life in a tiny room in Aldeburgh. She's arrived with only three bags, always travels light, having given up her post at

Dartington Hall to be here for him. Usefully, she knows how to handle young people... She eases his composer's block, soothes his physically manifesting psychological pain.

Both partake of copious glasses of hard liquor. Both talk of their war experiences, he (a conscientious objector) about going to perform in Belsen with Yehudi Menuhin and the horrors of "misplaced" people. That should be "displaced" people—DPs as they were known—"misplaced" conjures amusing images in my brain.

Ravenhill fleshes them both out with back and present stories. They make a fine odd couple. He resistant; she cajoling... Though she's no pushover. But does she deserve a medal... What veiled talent in her self-effacing power behind the throne... More than an amanuensis—I'd call her co-creator—though she'd probably say she's not good enough. She feeds him ideas, which he appropriates as his own.

In the 180-seater theatre-in-the-round, we are never more than three rows away, many critics in the second rows, and well-known faces in the front rows (this is press night after all). We are in their faces, they in ours, doesn't get more intimate than that under the microscope.

Nearly two and a half hours with interval—the first half a trifle too long—one wonders how this battle of wits will end. It's a rollercoaster of emotion. He tolerates her, then is cruel—quite a crescendo—she takes only so much, but returns for more. One might call it an abusive relationship. What would he have done without her? His next opera, she tells him, will be *The Turn of the Screw*.

The audience seems to be having a whale of a time watching two talents verbally jousting and almost drowning in the metaphorical and literal stormy weather (water gets into Ben's house on the beach at Christmas—he has gone away with no thought for her; she is there alone to clean it up). She never left Aldeburgh, both are now in the Aldeburgh churchyard. She weathered it all. He got the glory.

Reviewer: [Vera Liber](#)