

British Theatre Guide

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How Like An Angel

Circa & I Fagiolini

Commissioned by London 2012 Festival, presented by the Barbican

St Bartholomew the Great, Smithfield

25–28 June 2013

Terrific! Who could not be impressed and enthralled by this extraordinary performance?

Australia neo-circus group Circa and British vocal group I Fagiolini, who specialise in renaissance and contemporary music, were brought together by Jonathan Holloway for the festival in Perth (Australia) which he directs with the brief that their collaboration should use sacred music and be linked to the places where it was performed. That creation was developed for a British tour which has already visited several cathedrals before coming to London.

Presented in the twelfth-century church of St Bartholomew as part of the Barbican's "Beyond Barbican" programme, it has a magnificent setting. The promenade audience gathers between two platforms in the nave. They have the chance to wander around the shadowed church and absorb its atmosphere, mostly lit only by the last vestiges of external light, before joining the others in a central space lit with gentle gold rays.

All light is then extinguished, and out of the silence comes the sound of human voices from the west end of the church, almost yelps at first, answered shortly later by liturgical cadences from the east that advance towards the nave.

A muslin cloth moves over the audience's heads. They reach up to aid its progress to the central stage, and as it is hauled upwards, it begins to envelop a human figure, then a light appears, blue like the Virgin's gown in religious paintings. Then there is just the man, tense and struggling, his teeth tearing at his clothing as he contorts in spasms, the music now electronic. He painfully removes his blouson and jeans yet maintains fantastic balance. Is this a soul in torment?

There is no narrative to *How Like an Angel* but the setting and the atmosphere and the way in which, even for non-believers, our visual culture has been so full of religious imagery come together to suggest all kinds of parallels, Pietas and Depositions, flagellations, even the Fall of Lucifer as one acrobat plummets from high above our heads up in the clerestory down into the middle of the audience.

The music, which ranges from medieval monody and renaissance motets to a new work commissioned from Adrian Williams, may come from around, above or among the audience and the acrobats too descend from their stages, ropes and lisse ribbons, moving mounted on each other's shoulders among spectators.

There is one segment, early in the sequence, its music by Bheka Diamini, that has a joyful stamping rhythm and is sung in Zulu. It contrasts with the more obviously ecclesiastical work of Josquin de Pres, Victoria, Hildegard of Bingen and Thomas Tallis. The singers are among the

audience and its vitality infects the audience, making them part of it, picking up the stamping repetition, making themselves part of it.

The physical feats of the acrobats are mostly beautiful and always impressive, sudden slides down poles, fantastic balances, bodies in the air that seem to be held only by some physical magnetism, elegant or amusing variations on bodies piled on bodies, tumbling turns and violent crashing to the ground, movement and frozen stillness.

Sometimes the acrobats move to an electronic score, sometimes the singers are heard alone. The music may counterpoint the physical action, its fluid cadences in contrast to its tensions, sometimes it is complementary, as when a group advances through the audience to a repeated “Gaude” to reach one stage from the other as the show builds to a dazzling final sequence.

Although early on a singer makes contact to momentarily support an acrobat, establishing a very real connection, there is little actual contact between the acrobats and the singers but the two elements are always in. Nearing the end, the previously white-clad acrobats appear in the black garb of the singers and then circled by them, one company, but they have always been a balanced partnership.

How Like an Angel has voices soaring like angels and its acrobats seemingly as aerially comfortable as angels too, but whether the beauty of human voices and the skill of human bodies are also a reminder of just how amazing humans are in what they can achieve, of the beginning of the sentence of Hamlet’s from its title comes: “What a piece of work is man”.

Indeed; and this is a celebration as well as a demonstration of that by these men and women, the six acrobats of Circa and the nine singers of I Fagiolini. With them, Circa’s Artistic Director Yaron Lifshitz and I Fagiolini’s Robert Hollingsworth have created something very special.

Although the performance is not formally presented as a religious offering, the tradition that Canon Rahere, founder of this church in 1123, had been a minstrel or a jester before taking holy orders, makes it seem especially appropriate that these artists are performing in this space.

Reviewer: [Howard Loxton](#)