

British Theatre Guide

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Lulu - a Murder Ballad

The Tiger Lillies

Opera North, West Yorkshire Playhouse, Warwick Arts Centre

Northern Stage

27 February–1 March 2014

Frank Wedekind's dark stage masterpiece *Lulu* has seen countless adaptations over the last century—from Weber's opera to a Lou Reed/Metallica album—yet the play itself, like almost every German play ever written outside of Brecht, is rarely performed in the UK.

Maybe it's too unsavoury. Lulu is a character treated wretchedly by a succession of loathsome males as she journeys first up and then down the social scale; she is exploited, abused, finally dying at the hands of Jack the Ripper. Yet you could argue she herself is no angel, often giving as good as she gets, a seductress a temptress, a *femme fatale* almost half a century before Hollywood celebrated the species.

Not an easy character for any camp to feel comfortable with.

This new interpretation, *Lulu - a Murder Ballad*, opts for a kind of cabaret musical rendition performed live by the idiosyncratic trio The Tiger Lillies—where Tom Waits meets Kurt Weill.

There's an intriguing sense of the grotesque about the Lilies and their music, the painted grimacing white face of the highly versatile singer and lead Martyn Jacques employing to good effect his rusty lawnmower of a voice. He's backed by fellow musicians Adrian Stout and Mike Pickering as his lyrics' narration leads us through Lulu's life in a series of atmospheric, charged musical numbers, in which the trio play not only conventional instruments, but a musical saw, children's toys and a theremin.

Jacques also writes the lyrics which often drip with sardonic wit.

Usually the musicians in theatre sit near the wings. Here they take centre stage, which tends to leave Lulu, the solitary dancer Laura Caldow, marginalised. But I also have problems with her routine which seems too refined and tasteful for the character. Only in the penultimate number, the chilling *Here's Jack* does the dancing unleash itself and get to grips.

The succession of men the play pits against Lulu, Shunning, Goll, Schwartz, Alva et al, are abstractions, described in words, but never seen. They are simply shadows. One obvious solution is to include at least one male dancer which might root the choreography, give it a real beating heart.

In addition, Caldow has to compete against the brilliantly innovative design of Mark Holthusen (who also directs). This is a constantly-moving series of multi-dimensional images, a hi-tec evocation of murky Victoriana. Splendid, but possibly the wrong choice here and at times diminishing the dancer. Basically this is an intimate piece of cabaret theatre calling for the glistening sweat of human bodies in pain and ecstasy.

As is the modern tendency, it's a tri-partite production, a collaboration between Opera North, West Yorkshire Playhouse and Warwick Arts Centre. Someone somewhere might do an academic study of how such groupings effect each company's individuality.

How hard-working the musicians are! Within minutes of the curtain, the three were out front flogging merchandise. And how much I wanted to like it more than I did.

There's a real range of talents on show here. Just the niggling doubt of whether these same talents constitute a whole. I was never totally seduced.

Reviewer: [Peter Mortimer](#)