

British Theatre Guide

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We Open Our Mouth—and Listen

Written by Anika Barkan Composed by Mika Forsling

Gate Theatre

17–21 December 2019

How to describe this? It's part gig, part lecture, part exhortation but also a carefully constructed performance by Danish musician and composer Mika Forsling and performer and “cultural entrepreneur” Anika Barkan that offers an hour of intimate entertainment, political musing and good music that resonate especially strongly as the results of our general election sink in.

There's a blank screen which will be used later for a video and three anglepoise lamps that light Mika playing a gentle melody on guitar with a drum, banjo and bottles of beer on the floor beside him; on the other side of the stage, a mountain of books hide the head of Anika who is quietly singing.

Very, very slowly, she raises her head and the books fall away and she begins to confide in us. She's not very happy about things: tells us she talks to her cat Einstein about life, the state of the world—and everything.

Battered by what is going on in the world, she wonders what has happened to the spirit and ideals that we used to have, begins to give us her story then stalls. Though claiming working class origins, she's all too aware that today she has an education and cultural interests and a life that now make her middle-class. She says she can't go on but Mika insists and she begins to tell us about growing up in Copenhagen with her bricklayer father as we also see video of children like her and what looks like a CND protest as she talks of going on political demos with dad.

What has changed? Can we get back that spirit? What has happened to working class solidarity? Can we recharge those utopian aims?

She calls up her 80-year-old father on her computer and gets his thoughts as she asks her questions. We can see him on computer as he talks in Danish, Mika typing in English translations seen on the video screen.

She sings some of the old songs as she sets out her new utopian programme, refusing to co-operate with hate, speaking out, not indulging in nostalgia but making space for change, but she and Mika agree that they need to represent them in the musical language of today's youth.

Mika's music is a delight though their awful attempt at contemporary pop misfires (and they admit it) but they move on with greater conviction to a final rallying call in a song that rises to a dramatic crescendo.

Perhaps it sounds different in Danish, but that call to come together underlines the communication problem as they sing, “Let us tear down the walls and open our mouth.”

Let us! That politeness is so middle class; no way will it unify a community or get a British theatre audience marching out to the barricades. “Tear down the walls!” sounds more like it, but even in the heady days of 1960s activism, Living Theatre’s exhortations didn’t rouse Roundhouse audiences into action. Anika and Mika were received with enthusiasm, but their message is unlikely to echo in the wider world, especially this week.

Reviewer: [Howard Loxton](#)