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“ REVIEW

Dalia: tackling the refugee crisis and cricket, this community opera knocks them for six

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Garsington Opera's excellent season-closer features a richly textured score and life-changing debuts

By John Allison

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Garsington Opera's fifth and final production of the season has a relaxed, end-of-term feel. The formal dress code associated with country-house opera is refreshingly absent and the applause is probably the most enthusiastic heard all summer. That's because Dalia, receiving its world premiere, is the latest of Garsington's community operas, but the evening is far from light-hearted: with its story addressing the refugee crisis, this is the most serious and urgent subject matter of the season.

Five years on from *The Silver Birch*, their previous project for Garsington, the composer Roxanna Panufnik, librettist Jessica Duchon, conductor Douglas Boyd and director Karen Gillingham have teamed up again to produce a work involving almost 200 performers. Since the new piece was conceived, the plight of refugees has become even more pressing, but Dalia's story hasn't dated. A young adolescent, Dalia, has fled war in Syria, losing her father and brother to drowning at sea and becoming separated from her mother in a camp. She is fostered by a well-meaning family in a small English town where she initially meets simmering suspicion: "Not that we're not sorry for her, but what's she doing here?" sings the chorus.

But the local obsession is cricket, and the community eventually take Dalia to their hearts on account of the cricketing prowess she discovers within herself. Though there are a few opera plots involving football, baseball and other games, opera and sport usually stare at each other from opposite sides of the pitch, and this operatic paean to cricket is a first.

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The stage is filled by local performers - Garsington Opera's adult, youth and infant groups - and expanded via video to include choirs from Damascus, Bethlehem and Hebron, the Middle Eastern participants representing Dalia's inner voices. Panufnik's richly textured score accommodates them all, not only with an oud player joining the Philharmonia Orchestra in the pit but through the use of Arabic modes and inflections.

Words and notes come thick and fast, but there are also operatic professionals on stage to handle them - the most operatic lines belonging to the foster mother Maya, given a soaring performance by Kate Royal. The 16-year-old Adrianna Forbes-Dorant brings assured presence to the title role, and Merit Ariane, Jonathan Lemalu, Ed Lyon and Andrew Watts are all strongly committed to the project. Yet, more significantly, many will have had their first experience on stage, and many lives will have been changed as a result.

Until July 31. Tickets: 01865 361636; www.garsingtonopera.org

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