

The Yellow Wallpaper review



“Quietly terrifying power”

REVIEWS SEP 15, 2023 BY GEORGE HALL

LILIAN BAYLIS STUDIO, SADLER'S WELLS, LONDON



Clare Presland and Valerie Ebuwa in *The Yellow Wallpaper* at Lilian Baylis Studio, Sadler's Wells, London. Photo: Ida Guldbæk-Arentsen

Dani Howard's concentrated new opera receives a powerful presentation in its UK premiere

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Following her [Robin Hood](#) in 2019, this is another commission from The Opera Story for composer Dani Howard, who collaborates here with librettist Joseph Spence on an operatic version of American writer Charlotte Perkins Gilman's disturbing 1892 tale. The resulting four-hander premiered in Copenhagen last month.

A married woman is suffering from severe post-natal depression. Her husband, a doctor, takes her to an isolated old house to recuperate, but places restrictions on her activities – no writing, for example – which she disobeys. As a virtual prisoner in their bedroom, she becomes obsessed with the curiously coloured wallpaper, discerning in its patterns a woman, imprisoned, somewhat like herself, yet who eventually frees herself.

Economically staged by [Amy Lane](#), Spence and Howard's creation leaves audience members largely at liberty to arrive at their own understanding of what is really happening. The set could scarcely be more sparse – essentially just a chair on which the unnamed woman sits or reclines as she contemplates her solitary penance.



George Hall

George Hall writes widely on opera and has contributed regularly to *The Stage* since 2010. He has also contributed to such publications as *The New Penguin Opera Guide* and the *Oxford Companion to Music*.

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Mezzo-soprano [Clare Presland](#) gives a powerful portrayal, both vocally and dramatically, of the central character, whose self-analysis, fears and insecurities are explored with focused determination. Her counterpart – or alter ego? – is played by dancer/choreographer [Valerie Ebuwa](#), whose complex and subtle movements match perfectly with the score as well as with the piece’s compelling trajectory. Occasionally Ebuwa seems to attempt to engage with the two instrumentalists – pianist [Berrak Dyer](#) and cellist [Midori Jaeger](#) – but essentially, they provide an atmospheric accompaniment in which repeated minimalist gestures from the piano contrast with more expressive and sometimes percussive effects from the cello.

Moving clouds of mist, lit with striking imagination, suggest the wallpaper – both its extent and its shape-shifting. In one particularly disturbing scene, Ebuwa repeatedly cries out as she seems to tear the invisible, confining paper with her hands. At the end, the two figures seem to have switched places, with the singer now imprisoned within the sinister wallpaper, and the dancer freed.

The intriguing result marks a definite advance over Howard’s more diffuse Robin Hood, concentrating a good deal of inner psychological activity, as opposed to dramatic action, into its 50-minute span. The use of a dancer cleverly brings physicality into a narrative that is almost entirely internal. Spence’s elliptical text leaves the music plenty of space to expand, though arguably doesn’t supply quite enough information for newcomers to the story. Yet taken as a whole, the piece holds together remarkably well, its unified approach underpinning its quietly terrifying power.

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Production Details

Production name	The Yellow Wallpaper
Venue	Lilian Baylis Studio, Sadler's Wells
Location	London
Starts	14/09/2023
Ends	15/09/2023
Press night	14/09/2023
Running time	50mins
Composer	Dani Howard

Librettist	Joseph Spence
Director	Amy Lane
Choreographer	Valerie Ebuwa
Set designer	Damien Stanton, Emma Ryott
Lighting designer	Charlie Morgan Jones, Oliver Hynds
Cast includes	Clare Presland, Valerie Ebuwa, Berrak Dyer, Midori Jaeger
Company stage manager	Rachel Bell
Producer	Copenhagen Opera Festival, The Opera Story

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