Artistic director gets proper send off with exhilarating show

Theatrical Chess was written by Abba songwriting duo Björn Ulvaeus and Benny Anderson. When Andrew Panton takes his place as artistic director of Dundee Rep this week, he'll be propelled by the energy drummed up by the musical theatre students at the University of Dundee in his exhilarating production of Chess.

This is the musical written by Abba's songwriting duo Björn Ulvaeus and Benny Anderson with lyricist Tim Rice in which cold-war tensions between the Soviet Union and the USA are embodied by the fictional grandmasters Anatoly Sergievsky and Freddie Trumper. Perhaps it's not a perfect musical—there seem uncertain about whose story it's telling—but its combination of geopolitical and private romance engage the head and the heart and, in Panton's hands, it's as assured as it is ambitious.

With a raised stage of black marble backed by a metal gantry that could be straight out of The Tube, designer Kenneth MacLeod goes the full 1980s hog. The costumes are all black polo necks, rolled-up sleeves, big hair and shoulder pads, and Grant Anderson provides a rock 'n' roll lighting plan to match. Even the video projections have an authentic VHS fuzziness. But it's not just a retro-fest. The stakes feel genuinely high between Barney Wilkinson as an impetuous Trumper, the blond champion in chessboard white, and Jamie Fritchard as a surly Sergievsky, the black-clad opponent trying to keep his cool under psychological pressure. Both sing well and bring a sense of youthful chutzpah and volatility to their east-west clash.

If the words sometimes get lost in the ensemble numbers, the large chorus is deftly choreographed by Darragh O'Leary, backed by David Highton's vigorous band. The standout performance, though, is by Daisy Ann Fletcher as Florence Vassey, the chess-loving PA who transfers her affections from Trumper to Sergievsky but, here, never loses faith with the audience. It's not just the purity of her voice, nor her effortless control of tone and dynamics. It's her winning combination of modesty and openness that makes her a captivating presence. Even before her duet with Hayley VerVallen's commanding Swetana Sergievsky on I Know Him So Well, she has stolen the show. Remember her name.

There's another impressive performance in the Festival Theatre's studio where Mary Jane Wells tells the true story of Danna Davis, a US army mechanic who was raped by several members of her squad, before serving alongside her attackers during an Iraq ambush. Heroin is a compelling story of resilience and survival, told by Wells in her own script with tremendous assurance and vivid attention to detail.

There are a couple of flaws. By sticking to the real-life chronology, Wells deals with the two great moments of dramatic interest before the halfway point, leaving a less compelling story of therapy and recovery until last. And as Susan Worstall's otherwise clean and focused production, the theatrical energy is repeatedly drawn offstage to record voices making such unnecessary comments as: "Silence is a terrible accomplice."

But with Matt Paddington's less than soundscaping putting us on edge and the unsentimental poetry of the script keeping us gripped, it's a tough, impassioned show.

Mark Fisher