



↑ The musical *Chess* was written by Abba songwriting duo Björn Ulvaeus and Benny Andersson

## Artistic director gets proper send off with exhilarating show

### THEATRE

#### Chess

Festival Theatre, Edinburgh

★★★★

#### Heroine

Festival Theatre, Edinburgh

★★★★

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 of the Royal Conservatoire of Scotland in his exhilarating production of *Chess*.

This is the musical written by Abba's songwriting duo Björn Ulvaeus and Benny Andersson 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 – it seems uncertain about whose story it's telling – but its combination of geopolitics 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 Willkinson as an impetuous Trumper, the blond champion in chess-board white, and Jamie Pritchard 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 Higham's vigorous band.

The standout performance, though, is by Daisy Ann Fletcher as Florence Vassy, 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 con-

trol 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 VerValin's commanding Svetlana Sergievsky on *I Know Him So Well*, she has stolen the show. Remember the 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 squadron before serving alongside her attackers during an Iraqi ambush.

*Heroine* 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 half-way point, leaving a less compelling story of therapy and recovery until last. And in Susan Worsfold's otherwise clean and focused production, the theatrical energy is repeatedly drawn offstage to recorded voices making such unnecessary comments as, "Silence is a terrible accomplice."

But with Matt Padden's excellent soundscape putting us on edge and the unsentimental poetry of the script keeping us gripped, it's a tough, impassioned show.

MARK FISHER



ON DAISY ANN FLETCHER

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