

The Way Back Home *Lees*

ENGLISH NATIONAL OPERA
AT THE YOUNG VIC
LONDON

Music ★★★
Staging ★★★★★

World premiere

Review by Antonia Couling
Photography by Stephen Cumiskey

Librettist Rory Mullarkey has gone beyond the simple retelling of a boy's imaginary trip to the moon and his unlikely friendship with an alien. Using five extra characters, called Gismos, he has inserted a lot of additional 'business', including a battery of sound effects. The (silent) role of the Penguin, who features only marginally in Jeffers' book, is built up considerably in the opera: actor Peter Hobday makes a marvellous impression in his deliciously rotund, convincing costume.

Many of the younger children seemed perplexed at the liberties taken with a story that they know and love. Perhaps the older children could better appreciate the new interpolations. However, the epilogue in which the Penguin makes his


This special world premiere, ENO's first ever new opera for children, was eagerly anticipated by its mini audience members, especially as the set was on view before the show began and was easily recognisable from Oliver Jeffers' well-loved series of children's picture books.

own space trip and blows up his plane to find himself transported to the North Pole, was beyond the comprehension of most. In general, far too much knowledge of Jeffers' work is presumed by the creators of this opera – many of the unaccompanied adults must have left feeling bemused by it all. The Boy, for instance, is quite mean to the Penguin, which totally undermines the message of Jeffers' book: that friendship and companionship can be found in unlikely places.

Jeffers' visual style was, of course, a gift for the opera's designers, Vicki Mortimer and Molly Einchcomb. The shallow proscenium, complete with visible wing sections, accentuated the use of two-dimensional cut-out props (some on sticks, in the style of a Pollock's Toy Theatre). The costumes

captured the essence of Jeffers' illustrations, with their use of dip-dyed velvet fabric reflecting his watercolour textures.

Joanna Lees' rather generic score was packed to the gills with yet more sound effects: meaningless runs and percussive interjections, devoid of any themes and barely resisting the temptation to become Clanger-like once the Boy was up in space. So much more could have been achieved with the small piano, string, woodwind and percussion ensemble (under Steven Higgins' lively direction).

Director Katie Mitchell managed a vibrant production where Aoife O'Sullivan's Alien was full of energy, although as the Boy, Victoria Simmonds didn't entirely convince. The Penguin's slow-motion farting was a highlight. 

▼ Aoife O'Sullivan's energetic Alien



▼ Victoria Simmonds as the Boy

