

Sex Workers' Opera

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Operas typically feature sex workers but are never written and performed by them, explain Siân Docksey, Siobhan Knox and Alex Etchart.

‘PVC Clad Vice Girl sopranos’* meet high art in the latest rendition of the Sex Workers’ Opera. Devised over two years with escorts, strippers, webcam models and friends, this project takes a medium traditionally associated with wealth, power and influence and turns it on its head.

When directors Siobhan Knox and Alex Etchart began working on the Sex Workers’ Opera in 2014, they underestimated the attention from press and vocal support from the sex work community that the project would incite:

‘Art has a moral responsibility to represent people on their own terms, in their own words. We never intended to tell any one story more than another, but rather provide a platform and to listen. We knew it was new territory but could never have anticipated how hungry audiences were for brave, honest theatre created by the protagonists themselves.’

Two years on, the cast and creative team are still comprised of minimum 50 per cent sex workers, whose personal experiences make up the main body of the show. This multimedia performance also includes more than 50 stories from sex workers across 17 countries, creating a multi-voiced, diverse and rich landscape of the industry; from street-workers in Chile dealing with global south inequality to WebCam models in the USA performing poetry.

The Royal Opera House’s review – ‘What all great Opera should do’ – highlights an oft-overlooked aspect of this prestigious medium. Opera literally amplifies voices and puts complex, emotional struggles in front of huge audiences. But critics have pointed out that this powerful art form has become divorced from the lived experiences of ordinary people, and even more so from marginalized social groups. Chief Executive of the Arts Council England Darren Henley has remarked that ‘Every opera company must adapt or die’ – but is putting the onus on vulnerable unfunded groups to create great art a reasonable demand in a cultural landscape where only the most privileged survive?

‘We have been honoured with all the energy our cast and the global sex worker community have shared with us. If there’s anything we’ve learned, it’s that theatre making is incredibly inaccessible for autonomous groups. Paying ourselves, our cast and crew fairly, or indeed at all, for our time and artistry is incredibly challenging in an industry rife with non-inclusive practices. It’s ironic that the only exploitation people focus on is when it happens in the sex industry, as opposed to throughout capitalism,’ Knox and Etchart explain.

A project of this nature also encounters complex questions of allyship from feminist groups who are anti sex work, causing clashes with the cast who are predominantly women, mostly self-described feminists, and in the show plea for support from the wider community. The show is not saying sex work is ‘good’ or ‘bad’. It is saying please listen

to sex workers and ask them what they think. At its core, the Sex Workers' Opera is about building bridges. The story that weaves the narrative together is about a sex working daughter and her anti sex work feminist mother trying to understand and listen to each other, and arrive at some form of reconciliation.

From its beginnings, the Sex Workers' Opera received support and resources from the English Collective of Prostitutes, the Sex Worker Open University, X:talk, and other sex worker led groups whose core aim is to let sex workers speak for themselves, protect their rights, and break the stigma surrounding the industry.

Operas typically feature sex workers (*la Traviata*, *Madame Butterfly*) but are never written and performed by the workers themselves. The Sex Workers' Opera is a unique cultural event that blurs the line between artists and workers to give an unflinchingly honest accounts of this oft-misrepresented world.

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