

# Letter from Montenegro

By Claire Jackson

Electronic dance music blares out of Dvorana Park, a small multi-purpose hall in Herceg Novi, Montenegro. But this isn't just another club night in the coastal town's holiday season. Katherine Haataja, mezzo-soprano, artistic director and founder of Operosa, ushers us inside, away from the auditorium seats, and on to the stage – now a dance floor, where cast members writhe and shriek in time to the beat. The action centres around a large transparent box where a young woman (soprano Astrid Stockman) dances provocatively. WhatsApp messages are projected on to the box: 'Who does she think she is?' is punctuated with sickened-face emojis and 'hang yourself' hashtags. The authors come alive: a pack of teenagers who hurl abuse at the box where Stockman hides. *Be My Superstar* is about her subsequent spiral into self-destruction, tackling bullying, self-harm and social media.

It's not the first time that online bullying has been explored in opera. Nico Muhly's *Two Boys* (ENO, 2011; Met, 2013) followed a similar premise, but while that work depicted events at the turn of the millennium, *Be My Superstar* is set in the present day. And unlike Muhly's opera, composer Šimon Voseček and director Alexandra Lacroix have specifically aimed their work at young adults; many 14-16 year-olds were present in the audience, and some had participated in the ancillary workshops. Countertenor Logan Lopez Gonzalez gave a compelling performance as the



Operosa takes a hard-hitting look at the dark side of social media

reluctant perpetrator, although at times his diction made the plot difficult to follow (the opera was performed in English, with Montenegrin surtitles given above the transparent box). As with other ENOA/LOD Muziektheater productions (such as *icon*, seen at this year's Aldeburgh Festival) the singers broke the fourth wall; Gonzalez and Stockman excelled in their audience engagement.

Thanks to the work of pioneering theatre groups like Punchdrunk, immersive staging is growing in popularity. However, if not done well it can seem forced and ineffective. Lacroix mixed the subtle (Gonzalez looking at his phone in the

audience – so real I had to suppress a tut) with the more obvious audience participation (calling on certain people to insult a glass of water). Her greatest triumph, though, was including the musicians as actors; hats off to Spectra – a quartet of violin, cello, viola and bass clarinet – who danced, had lines and played Voseček's complex score (sometimes while blindfolded, laid down and squished into the box). The video artwork that was projected on to the box was unique to each facade, so that there were four different versions of the production happening simultaneously (two were experienced for this review). A fascinating concept that

was thoughtfully considered, prepared and delivered.

Montenegro does not have an opera house, and before Operosa's annual Opera Festival, established in 2006, opera was rarely – if ever – available. While there were some raised eyebrows in the audience, the people who mattered – the mid-teens – were enraptured, as the Q&A after the second performance revealed. **ON**

*Be My Superstar* is an ENOA co-production and tours to LOD Studio, Ghent (28-30 January); Opera Vlaanderen Antwerp (11-13 February); Snape Maltings (11 April); Théâtres de la Ville de Luxembourg (9 June); Festival Aix-en-Provence (11-12 June); Helsinki Festival (24-28 August).