

Triple bravo for Brel

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ENCORE Jacques Brel !

And what a brilliant encore it is, a shimmering, resonant echo of that wonderful evening a few years ago — how many years now? — when Taubie Kushlick first introduced the Belgian chanson to a delighted Johannesburg.

An echo . . . and, in some ways, even a transcending.

For "Encore Brel", with a brand new score and superlative, magical performances, captures what, for all its initial splendour, Taubie's production of "Jacques Brel is Alive and Well . . ." somehow never quite managed to contain — the gnawing bitterness, the smouldering anger that lies behind the mocking irony.

But, like its predecessor, it reaches out achingly for the one, elusive thing that could alleviate the pain of existence and lighten the despair — love.

I was enchanted, I was moved. Brel had been made whole again. New again.

THEATRE

Raeford Daniel

Encore Brel

Chelsea Theatre

He was made so by three remarkable talents — those of the staunch Ferdie Uphof and Ann Hamblin, whose interpretative rapport with Brel has grown in strength, distilling into something exceptionally fine, and by the lovely Laurika Rauch, who in this stunning Brel debut — possibly the most exciting since that of Jean Dell — evinces a grasp of his intentions that is near-definitive.

I think what impresses me most about Laurika's performance is its total honesty. In placing each note, shaping each phrase, one is convinced that she is aiming less for effect than for the essential truth of the statement.

She does quite breathtakingly beautiful things with standards

such as "If you go away" (sung in the original French as well as in the McKuen version), "Tenderness", "Prayer for your return", "The Dove" and the spoken "Song without words".

And she is quite magnificent in her treatment with the marathon "My Open Land" (an exceptionally fine transcription by Morné Coetzer).

The astonishing Ferdie Uphof is better than ever. He bounces on in an overture-reprise of "Jackie" and for an anxious moment one fears a repetition of the excesses of "Alive and Well". But no. His first number, "How can I kill her fancy man", is a serio-comic *tour de force* which is delivered with a most commendable economy of gesture and *absolutely no mugging*. The restraint and general tastefulness of this delivery happily becomes the keynote of the whole presentation.

His robust treatment of "The taxicab" and "The music of

Paree", the rich histrionic colour of his "Fernand", "I'm there" and "The devil" and the lyricism of his "Sleep my love" are decided show stoppers.

Ann Hamblin is splendidly, triumphantly back on form. Her voice has deepened in timbre and, perhaps, something of the coloratura flexibility is gone. But there is no trace of fruitiness and she makes admirable use of the new quality in exploring Brel's particular brand of musical expressionism.

Her renditions of "My childhood", "Girl in an armchair" and the haunting "Song of the old lovers" are exquisite. And has she ever sung "Mariék" better?

Lindsay Heard's musical direction is excellent. I was particularly impressed by the balancing and orchestrated blending of the voices, notably of Ann Hamblin and Laurika Rauch in the amusing ascerbic "The Hypocrites".