

Barry Ronge's showTimes



When simple songs rise to touch a nation

NOTHING could be simpler than Laurika Rauch's new show *Laurika Sings Brel*.

In a black velvet tunic over black trousers, with her hair hung loose, she sings familiar favourites and less well-known numbers with no linking patter between the songs.

"The songs speak for themselves," she says at the start. She simply rides the waves of applause in silence before diving into the next one.

The decor consists of a large screen of translucent plastic behind which we glimpse a jumble of chairs and discarded clothes, a mute echo of the themes of loves lost to time and folly which inform all Brel's songs.

When Laurika sang Brel's passionate patriotic anthem *Mijn Vlakke Land*, in Flemish — which is so close to Afrikaans, it was a stirring moment and it sent my mind back to the problem of what will become of Afrikaans.

This is shaping up to become a cultural battlefield and it occurred to me that if Afrikaners are looking for a Mother Courage to sing them on to glory, Laurika would fit that bill.

That is my perception, not hers. "I've never been a *kampvegter* for Afrikaans," she says. "I grew up in a Cape family where literature and music was always present."

"I grew up totally bilingual but loving Afrikaans as an amazing language in which to express yourself."

"It was only when I came to the Transvaal that I realised how politicised it was," she says.

But whether she planned it or not, her songs spoke to the vanguard of emergent "alternative Afrikaners" of the day.

Her first big hit was *Kinders Van Die Wind*, the theme tune of the hit TV show *Phoenix En Kie*. A tough drama about drifters and losers in a violent city which portrayed a generation of urban Afrikaners far away from

their pioneering, rural roots.

It was also 1978, two years after the first Soweto riots and winds of change were blowing in South Africa.

When Laurika sang about "*swerwers sonder rigting en soekers wat nooit vind, want eindelijk is almal maar net kinders van die wind*" she defined a generation and touched a nerve of their developing consciousness.

A lot of her impact has to do with the quality of her voice. Usually described as "throaty" or "smoky", I think it is like amber, tawny and mellow, sometimes clear as crystal, sometimes opaque and misty.

The distinctive thing is that like amber it retains and preserves things, fragments of leaf and blossom, an insect wing or a bit of bark. It carries its own freight of history within it. Where it's been is what it is.

That's why Laurika's voice is so perfect for Brel, with his memory that just won't quit.

There is never a clear moment of plain experience in Brel. Every sensation is shaped by the past and aimed at a future. Laurika's voice plays every mood and time shift like a virtuoso.

But that's also why her voice is so perfect for Afrikaans songs because the Afrikaners are a melancholy nation.

They love looking back. Heri-

tage and struggle, ancestors and grief run like dark veins of ore through the culture and form part of its substance and stature.

And Laurika sings those themes better than anyone.

Not that she's a gloomy existential diva. When she's not singing Brel's sardonic refrains she's full of laughter and chat about her two young children and the art of balancing music and motherhood in a happy whole.

She's also wary of labels. She does not want to be anything more than a singer, pure and simple, but she knows her songs have echoes.

"A lot of it is due to my songwriter Chris Torr (he's also her husband but she doesn't say that), who's an English boerekind."

"He comes from the Eastern Cape where everything is a story and he has captured their way of looking at things anecdotally."

"He's very direct and personal. He can apply the seat of his pants to the seat of his songwriting chair, but he also captures an indefinable poignancy about people. That's his special gift."

Laurika's special gift is the ability to sing it and poignancy is a word well-suited to aspects of Afrikaner culture right now.

What will become of the words of the past, not the politician's rhetoric but the voices of the poets and lyricists voicing the hearts of the people?

There's no easy answer to that. Many of them feel they are what Brel in one of his songs calls, "surrealist pilgrims, melting their clocks in marble halls".

Laurika sings that line in her show and she makes it a vivid image of anxiety and loss, which cannot fail to find an echo in an unfolding cultural drama in which she is and will remain a key player.

□ *Laurika Sings Brel* is on at After Dark in Pretoria from July 11 to 16 before embarking on a short tour.