

Deal with devil delivers

MAKE a deal with the devil and suffer the consequences in a world where only God can provide salvation. That's the far-reaching message in Gounod's mid-19th century grand French opera, *Faust*. With more than a century of passing, its religious and moral fearmongering might appear heavy-handed but the work still delivers a jolt. Not only is director David McVicar's *Faust* for Opera Australia a lavish spectacle that surprises at every turn — right up to a devil in drag — it draws you in to contemplate

FAUST

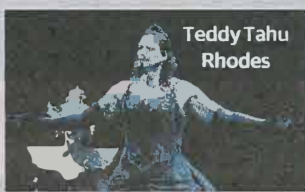
★★★★

Details: Opera Australia, State Theatre, Arts Centre Melbourne, until Dec 7

Reviewer: Paul Selar

its many directorial and scenographic choices that highlight, above all, moral hypocrisy.

In its clever update from 16th century Germany to Second Empire Paris on the eve of the Franco-Prussian War, the juxtaposition of church, theatre and civic life is



Teddy Tahu Rhodes

a constant source of intrigue. The frail, old Faust gives himself to the devil in exchange for youth, falls in love with the innocent Marguerite and, coerced by Mephistopheles to pursue more than affection, gets her pregnant. Marguerite's downfall is

rapid, the tragedy pronounced by choreographer Michael Keegan-Dolan's multi-emotive Walpurgisnacht Ballet, its grotesque half-theatre, half-hallucination a brilliant summary as Marguerite is shamed while the ogling male aristocracy of the Paris Opera audience prey on their targets.

On opening night, as the old Faust, an initial harshness in Saimir Pirgu's striking volcanic tenor settled as he took on handsome youth with passion and wariness. In a Melbourne and role debut, Maria Mudrya detailed

Marguerite's trajectory with poignancy with her bright soprano but vocal shading was often insufficiently used despite reserves of thrilling power.

There was a telling, sometimes likeable, side to Teddy Tahu Rhodes' towering Mephistopheles as he morphed from one huge identity to another.

Conductor Guillaume Tourniaire dug deep to extract the ebb and flow of Gounod's score without urgency and the thrillingly mobilised OA Chorus finished on a notably rousing level fit to please God.

EXPOSING PLOT OF AN ECCENTRIC

I SHOT MUSSOLINI

★★★★

Details: At La Mama Courthouse, until Dec 8

Reviewer: Kate Herbert

THE Honourable Violet Gibson, a wealthy Irishwoman, shot Italian dictator Benito Mussolini in Rome in 1926, but, despite her best intentions, injured only his nose.

Based on this little-known, true event, *I Shot Mussolini*, written and directed by Alice Bishop, uses source material including *The Irish Baron's Daughter*



and *Mussolini's Nose* by Richard Collin, and is a fascinating, often funny, sometimes tragic story of the ailing, ageing and privileged Violet Gibson (Heather Lythe, pictured).

This episodic play begins with Violet's apprehension, then charts her ensuing incarceration, using stylised action, a parade of characters and some witty dialogue.

Violet manoeuvres a path from botched assassination attempt, through police interviews, psychiatric assessments and even consultations with various saints who she views as her co-conspirators.

Lythe plays the eccentric Violet with an impeccable Irish accent, and is compelling, disturbing and credible as this woman who feigns madness, confesses to political conspiracy, or tilts into genuine delusions and religious mania.

The ensemble, wearing black and white, plays multiple roles as nuns, police, judiciary, journalists and saints. The acting quality varies and some of the Italian accents are patchy, but there are some standouts.

Despite its unevenness, this production leaves us wondering how the world might have changed had Violet succeeded.



Trevor Smith with his handmade tea cosies, on show at the A Boy's Own Story exhibition.

Boys have creativity stitched

COLIN VICKERY

REAL men knit! That is the rallying cry for the artists featured in the *A Boy's Own Story* exhibition this summer at The Johnston Collection.

Trevor Smith grew up on a farm and was taught to crochet by his mother. Now he is famed for his quirky tea cosies of characters including Liberace and Cleopatra.

Vietnam War veteran David Collyer is a third-generation knitter and lace maker who creates most of the jumpers he wears.

His grandfather Archibald started the ball of wool rolling when he was serving in the army in Queensland.

The military is a common thread. John Scollay knitted a sweater when he was sent to a

German prisoner of war camp after being captured in Normandy during World War II.

Luke Hockley revels in activism. By making his own shirts and repairing others for his *Love Me Till I Fall Apart* project, he critiques the impact of society's clothing habits on the natural world and explores gender politics.

"Sewing a shirt by hand is a

rejection of the idea of what we allow a man to be and do," Hockley says. "It is also an apology to those (mostly women) who work in terrible conditions to make our clothing."

For some of these artists, hitting the needles and yarn is calming and therapeutic. Others see it as a means of self-expression or bask in the joy of creativity. Whatever the

motive, they are busting stereotypes.

"This exhibition is an opportunity for visitors to be exposed to men creating work that has in recent generations been assumed to be female-centric," the Collection's Irina Agaronyan says.

A BOY'S OWN STORY, JOHNSTON COLLECTION, EAST MELBOURNE. UNTIL FEB 4. johnstoncollection.org

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