A Fresh Start and Two (More) Portraits: Theatrical Shows on the Life and Work of Ethel Smyth for 2018

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Two contrasting initiatives are being brought to the stage this year to mark the involvement in the suffrage movement of Dame Ethel Smyth (1858–1944), composer, author, and suffragette. Both find their unique place within the wider lineage of literary representations of Smyth, hence my appropriation of a formulation originally used by her in Streaks of Life, ‘A Fresh Start and Two Portraits’, for the title of this review.¹ The first project, Ethel Smyth: Grasp the Nettle, is a nationally touring professional solo production for actor-singer Lucy Stevens accompanied by Elizabeth Marcus at the piano. The other, Ethel Smyth: A Furious Longing – The Story of Woking’s Composer, is a more locally-focussed amateur venture developed by Woking Community Play Association, to be performed by an ensemble cast in the town in which Smyth was resident for the last several decades of her life.

Between her larger-than-life personality and her fascinating biography, Smyth yields much real-life material with which to inspire and enrich works of art. Ethel Smyth: Grasp the Nettle, touring England in 2018 and 2019, is equally at home in a variety of venues, in no small measure due to its two artists’ responsiveness to different types of spaces and their seemingly limitless capacity to captivate audiences. Its titular phrase is drawn from Smyth’s reflection on her unconventional relationship with Henry Brewster, that ‘From the first, Harry and I were prepared ... firmly to grasp the nettle, but not to flourish it unnecessarily in people’s faces’, coupled to a remark she once made in her diary concerning ‘a great article I mean to write when I have time: “Grasping the Nettle”, that is, showing up the anti-woman thing’.² Correspondingly, the first half centres on the period of The Wreckers (1902–4), Smyth’s most ambitious and large-scale opera (for which she collaborated with Brewster as librettist) as well as her crowning achievement in the genre, and the second on her involvement with the suffragette movement.

In an ingenious workaround to the restrictions inherent in a one-woman show, the script of Grasp the Nettle has been artfully compiled from Smyth’s words and music almost exclusively,
complemented by testimonials from others who knew her (whose words are given voice during the performance via mocked-up audio recordings). Opening with Smyth’s powerful statement that ‘There is no sex in art’³ (which itself resonates with her later claim made in her most stridently feminist text, Female Pipings in Eden, that ‘Art is bi-sexual, the female element implicit with the male’⁴), it is judiciously bookended by Smyth’s Mass in D (1891), from the solemn initial strains of its ‘Kyrie’ to the work’s glorious closing ‘Amen’. The carefully crafted show incorporates many wonderfully subtle touches: for example, Smyth’s visionary proclamation that ‘I want women to turn their minds to big and difficult jobs; not just to go on hugging the shore, afraid to put out to sea’ is accompanied by an excerpt from her ‘On the Cliffs of Cornwall’, the Prelude to Act 2 of The Wreckers.⁵ Mention of Elisabeth von Herzogenberg, the wife of Smyth’s Leipzig-based composition teacher thought to have been her first serious (albeit unrequited) lesbian love interest, prompts Marcus’s playing of the opening of Smyth’s piano piece ‘Aus der Jugendzeit!!’ (c.1878–80), a musical character-sketch of the object of her affections.

Grasp the Nettle benefits considerably from the multi-talented Stevens’s dual background as actress and singer, thoroughly embodying the character of Smyth and bringing her to life through her commanding vocal presence, as well as breathing life into words that – even in the most familiar of the passages culled from Smyth’s writings – do not have quite the same effect on the page as the stage. Stevens delights audiences through her performances of extracts from Smyth’s vocal music as interludes to her monologue, providing some effective and engaging contrasts. Remarkably versatile as a vocalist, Stevens follows Smyth’s reported practice of singing all the roles from bass to soprano when introducing her music, and Grasp the Nettle thereby doubles as a compelling education in some of Smyth’s most major works.

Given its nature as a theatricalised show, the balance between words and music in Grasp the Nettle is stacked significantly in favour of the former. Marcus is gifted with the rare ability to enter seamlessly as pianist, underscoring Stevens’s narration in the manner of a melodrama such that the speech remains squarely in the foreground. Even when Smyth’s music is heard, then, often this takes the form of Marcus’s performing excerpted piano arrangements to provide atmospheric accompaniment to Stevens’s narrative. Perhaps inevitably, Smyth’s works of the period around the 1910s tend to dominate, and ‘The March of the Women’ itself is possibly a little
over-used, with half a dozen instances towards the start of Act 2, partly in consequence of Smyth’s having herself quoted the melody in the song ‘On the Road’ and in the Overture to The Boatswain’s Mate. That said, its main presentation is pleasingly unexpected, lyrical and plaintive rather than defiantly militant, reflecting its use to comfort and console suffragettes during the dark hours of imprisonment and hunger striking and not merely to rouse the crowds and promote solidarity during rallies and demonstrations.

Doubtless I was not alone in longing to hear more from the two musicians, given both the expressiveness they consistently brought to their fresh interpretations of Smyth’s works, and since many of the musical offerings in Grasp the Nettle comprise extracts rather than complete pieces. Indeed, its billing at Oxfordshire’s annual Festival of English Music as a ‘morning concert’ courted the danger that audience members might have expected a more conventional, unstaged recital offering unabridged pieces, as well as selling it short by overlooking its immense value as theatre. It was nevertheless very positively received by the sizeable audience on that occasion, with multiple curtain calls – although not as many as Smyth herself received (thirteen) at the Leipzig premiere of The Wreckers in 1906!

Ethel Smyth: A Furious Longing – The Story of Woking’s Composer is the brainchild of Woking Community Play Association (WCPA), a non-auditioning group for all ages whose mission is to ‘tell stories of Woking that bring people together to make drama’. Founded in 1990, it is perhaps unsurprising that Smyth, as one of Woking’s most famous former residents, has previously appeared as a secondary character in its inaugural stage production, Ann Jellicoe’s Changing Places (1992). The phrase ‘a furious longing’ was used several times by Smyth in her memoirs, for instance, in conveying her profound desire to return to the friends she had made in Leipzig, having gone back to her English family home for the summer in 1878. The central premise of WCPA’s play is that a high-school student, Gyana, is given a homework assignment to research Ethel Smyth, not somebody with whom she was previously familiar. Online, she comes across various resources on Smyth at the fictional video-sharing site ‘Ourtube’ (a thinly-veiled reference to YouTube), which are enacted onstage by the cast while being freely commented upon by Gyana herself. Through this means, Smyth’s life story is revealed to the audience chronologically.
Over two years in the planning, and having been unsuccessful in raising sufficient funds to commission a professional scriptwriter, WCPA took the bold decision to write the entirety of *A Furious Longing* in-house, dividing the labour between five authors with strong ties to the Association.\textsuperscript{10} It is one of the script’s strengths that Smyth’s life is retold through multiple, occasionally conflicting, authorial voices, eschewing a sense of uniformity. Significant artistic licence has been creatively exercised in developing the script; fresh interpretations are provided for some of the best-known episodes in Smyth’s life story. She is introduced to Pankhurst at a private meeting between the two of them, rather than by hearing Pankhurst speak publicly at a suffragette meeting; and she arranges in advance to conduct the suffragettes with her toothbrush in the famous anecdote from her days in Holloway prison, having been alerted that Thomas Beecham has arrived to visit her. And, although the play proceeds chronologically, it strangely reverts to 1923 for its final scene, ending twenty-one years before Smyth’s death and antedating some of her greatest work, which runs the risk of leading to some confusion on the part of audience members.

*A Furious Longing* has been in rehearsal since the start of June, and it is due to be performed on 4–6 October 2018 in the Kemp Room at the H.G. Wells Centre, Woking. It will be intriguing to see the strategies by which director Tracey Adkins navigates its multi-faceted script to yield a cohesive interpretation for the stage, as well as those by which the actors realise its characters and respond to the complexities of a play incorporating so much content and so many minor roles. Notwithstanding the challenges inherent in the theatrical presentation of a biographical play, I am optimistic that this production will meet with much success in Smyth’s home town, and that it will confirm that Smyth continues to be of great interest both to local amateur communities as well as to national professional projects.

**Notes**

\textsuperscript{1} Ethel Smyth, ‘A Fresh Start and Two Portraits’, *Streaks of Life* (London, Longmans, 1921, 2\textsuperscript{nd} ed. 1924), 69–92.


4 Ethel Smyth, ‘Female Pipings in Eden’, *Female Pipings in Eden* ([London], Peter Davies, 1933, 2nd ed. 1934), 3–56, at 47.


8 See also *Changing Woking, 1900–1929* (Old Woking, Woking Community Play Association Research Group, 1992), 44–5, 62.
