Over 200 artists perform at London Concert for Peace

Paul Bond
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On the evening of Sunday March 23, over 200 theatre performers took part in a special gala show at the filled to capacity Theatre Royal, Drury Lane, London, under the banner of the *London Concert for Peace*. The show was put together by performers working in the West End to express their opposition to the US-led war against Iraq. It featured solo readings and songs, as well as ensemble numbers provided by the companies of several shows. Proceeds from ticket sales are to be donated to human rights groups and aid agencies.

There was an extraordinary range of talent on display that enabled the organisers to put together a bill of some breadth of emotional tone—an important factor in the success of the evening.

There were some intense and harrowing pieces. Ian McKellen's rendition of Siegfried Sassoon's *Suicide in the Trenches* was a quietly dignified reading. Hans Peter Janssens' performance of *Bring Him Home* (Valjean's prayer for the safe return of Marius from the barricades, from *Les Miserables*) and Linda Nolan and company's singing of *Tell Me It's Not True* from *Blood Brothers* were among the best of the reflective pieces from musicals.

That reflectiveness was not the dominant sentiment of the evening. There was from the outset a tone of defiant exuberance to many of the pieces. I freely confess to ambivalence about the quality of many of the musicals in the West End, but presenting numbers from their shows maximised the participation of large contingents from the casts.

The tone was set by the opening rendition of Cole Porter's *Anything Goes* by Sally Ann Triplett and members of the Royal National Theatre [RNT] company. Porter featured again, with Kim Criswell barnstorming her way through *I've Still Got My Health*. Elsewhere we got a charming performance of *Funny Face* by Hilton McRae and Jenny Galloway, while John Barrowman offered a fiery reading of Stephen Sondheim's tribute to the ability to cling on to some kind of life, no matter how hopeless, *Being Alive*, from the show *Company*.

Two moments defined the feeling behind these choices. Joanna Riding found herself on stage without a Musical Director to conduct the band for her performance of *I Could Have Danced All Night* from *My Fair Lady*. She explained to the audience what might feel like an odd choice of song under the circumstances. "It's a song of hope," she said. "And we mustn't lose hope."

The other was in the one truly showstopping moment of the evening, when Judi Dench belted out the title song from *Cabaret* (she had played Sally Bowles in the West End when the show first opened in London). Here, perhaps, was the clearest sense of defiance in the face of the world's collapse. ("When I die, I want to die like Elsie"). This feeling was summed up movingly in a short comment by Janie Dee, one of the show's organisers. She said that they had been organising the event for some weeks before the war began. Once the bombing started, there had been some doubts about continuing with the show. However, she said, "We don't know what else to do, that's why we're here." This was a sincere and honest statement of the position many artists find themselves in.

There was an attempt throughout the evening to express some kind of humanity. Artistically the highest moments came with those pieces which were not chosen for any resonance, but because they met the artistic requirement of the performer—the "Flower Duet" from Delibes' *Lakme*, and "Habanera" from *Carmen.*

It was possible for some of the performers to transcend the limitations of the material they had chosen. Alex Jennings read from *Letter to Daniel*, a book written for his young son by the BBC foreign correspondent Fergal Keane. Keane's own reading of the work on British radio tended to be a mawkish affair, but Jennings' reading of a

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passage about children Keane had seen dying succeeded in expressing deep concern for the fate of fellow human beings. A similar thing happened with Sian Phillips' performance of *Where Have All the Flowers Gone* by veteran folksinger and peace campaigner Pete Seeger. The song is best known in a liltingly inoffensive '60s folk scene version by Peter Paul & Mary. Phillips, accompanied by David Shrubsole at the piano, turned it into an almost Dietrich-esque piece of cabaret.

All the performers seemed determined to give a new weight to the pieces that were directly about war. The evening was slightly the weaker in the spoken pieces, and not just because the stage sound system was so geared to the musical companies. There seemed to be a difficulty in finding the right words, in finding the appropriate message. This was most clearly expressed in the quotes read by Alex Hanson, Rebecca Callard, Simon Green, Janet Henfrey and Rupert Wickham. They were an odd assortment from various sources. W.H. Auden was quoted, talking about the beginning of the Second World War, as was Spanish film director Pedro Almodovar, talking about the bombing of Iraq. They cited the Bishop of Chichester from 1944, talking about the responsibilities for peace, and Emily Dickinson's *Hope is the thing with feathers* was recited. The most powerful of the quotes was Bertolt Brecht's answer to the question whether there will be singing in the dark times. He replies, "Yes. There will be singing *about* the dark times."

Better were the letters read from Baghdad: These highlighted, in human terms, what is meant by the "blockade of humanitarian traffic" into Iraq in the period following the first Gulf War. A 1995 letter detailed a husband's four-day scouring of the pharmacies around Baghdad looking for medicines for his wife's post-hysterectomy treatment.

Three quotations stood out from these letters. Talking about the years of sanctions and embargo, one Iraqi wrote, "These feel like worthless, wasted years." Another said, "This is our life—humiliation and more humiliation." In one of the most recent letters an American peace worker wrote that it is "becoming clear that the Iraqis are not, cannot be prepared" for the war.

Two of Harold Pinter's recent antiwar poems were read out, as well as *Lysistrata* (based on the play by the great Athenian comedian Aristophanes) by the poet and playwright Tony Harrison (who wrote a major poem against the first Gulf War, *A Cold Coming*).

Pinter excoriated against the destruction and the massacre ("All we have left are the bombs which polish the skulls of the dead"). Harrison sees in the conflagration the potential destruction not just of life and civilisation, but also of our heritage, our memory, of the background to our whole society. In the Third World War, he said, we will destroy not only the modern cities, but also the memory of cities such as Troy. He insisted that this is a global matter ("we've made the world") and his use and defence of ancient literature is not just about "a bunch of Greeks". It matters now. It was the most perceptive piece of the evening on the defence of what is best of the culture of the past. It was the most conscious expression of a determination to use that culture as a weapon in opposition to a war that could destroy it.

The most explicitly political speech was made by Yvonne Ridley, the *Daily Express* journalist detained by the Taliban during the war in Afghanistan. She was in jail in Kabul during the US air bombardment and she spoke from bitter experience of what it is like to endure that kind of assault. She has since reported extensively from the Middle East and offered many images from her coverage of Palestine. She was alone in connecting the military assault against Iraq and the Sharon government's escalating onslaught against the Palestinians. If she tended to describe the conflict in moral terms, her testimony was still a powerful reminder of the wider issues.

The artists who took part all sought to express their opposition to the war, under conditions in which there had been growing pressure on them to come behind the war effort. Their stand was therefore both courageous and—particularly given the numbers who took part—a significant gauge of the depth of feeling against the war both within artistic circles and more broadly within British society.

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