

The British Theatre Guide

The Turing Test

An Opera by Julian Wagstaff

Edinburgh Studio Opera

Augustine's

***(*)

Ostensibly, *The Turing Test* is an opera about the race among scientists to create a machine displaying human intelligence. Operas, however, are not about machines; they are about human passions. This short chamber opera concerns a group of people seeking to create perfection in a machine, while their own lives are driven by all too human flaws. By juxtaposing these two essential elements of the 21st century, *The Turing Test* asks us to consider what it means to be human. Central to the theme is the question: what is the meaning of life? The answer is: the meaning of life is only revealed in the way you live your life.

Julian Wagstaff has written *The Turing Test* as part of his PhD at Edinburgh University. He is one of those young composers with new ideas for regenerating a conservative art. *The Turing Test* straddles the past and the future, pushing the boundaries of the form in subject matter, structure and tonality, while managing still to satisfy traditionalists. It is an ambitious piece of work, certainly for a five-day run in a small venue created only for the duration of the Edinburgh Festival where ambient conditions, dressing-room space, turn-around times, inadequate lighting and technical support all too often impinge on performance values.

The plot-line is simple: a research assistant is trapped between two scientists, one a womaniser, the other an alcoholic. She betrays herself for both of them and in doing so faces ruin. It is a cautionary tale embedded in the realities of contemporary academic necessity. It is lack of funding that drives her to fake her research results and the lack of research results that drives her professor to alcohol.

The cast of very competent young singers has been skilfully and perceptively directed by Chris Neil to inhabit the characters' impulses moment by moment as they struggle with their unfulfilled desires and acts of (self-) betrayal. Wagstaff's music, beautifully performed, and Neil's incisive direction blend seamlessly to embody the theme and encourage the performers cast off hesitation and soar through the trials and passions of life and performance.

Jackie Fletcher