

From Cars to Mars

national waterfront museum, swansea

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ONE of the accusations frequently levelled at the performing arts is that they are, by their very nature, elitist – fit only for well-heeled toffs and excluding the very sections of society who would gain maximum benefit from exposure to the infinite possibilities that theatrical performance can inspire in a lively mind.

The genre in which these preconceptions flourish most commonly is that of opera – and while much of this can be rightly put down to inverted snobbery, there is undoubtedly a sense in which some devotees of opera do little to reverse the popular view that those who attend operatic productions on a regular basis are on a higher social level than the rest of us.

Add to this the fact that many people still balk at the very notion of walking into a theatre auditorium – except perhaps to watch the likes of Roy 'Chubby' Brown – and one begins to see that making opera "accessible" to the man in the street is by no means an easy task.

So how exactly does one bring the joys of operatic performance to the masses? During its relatively short history, Swansea City Opera has had an imaginative approach when it comes to spreading the word about opera: specialising in wholly accessible works which can be scaled down to suit smaller venues where necessary, the company has forged links with disadvantaged groups in and around South Wales and actively encourages those who find themselves intimidated by operatic performance to come along and share the magic.

SCO's experience with the socially disadvantaged has led to this admirable and ambitious project which has seen the company working in collaboration with Swansea Cyrenians' Dragon Arts and Learning Centre, the Arts Council of Wales and the City and County of Swansea to produce an original piece revolving around the theme of transport down the ages.

The finished product, staged in Swansea's National Waterfront Museum proved to be an amusing and diverting piece which featured an 11-strong cast comprised of operatic professionals and amateur performers from Dragon Arts. If the amateur participants gained much from the experience, then so too did the professionals, who clearly relished the opportunity to let their hair down for this energetic romp which followed the adventures of a motley tribe as they travelled through time, making their way from a tropical island to the central reservation of a 21st century motorway, stopping off here and there to encounter prehistoric reptiles and maidens from Mars, courtesy of a time machine disguised as a telephone box.

OK, this wasn't exactly *The Flying Dutchman*, but then it never pretended to be – and who would not find themselves smiling at an operatic work which includes the words, "Sahara is a tart from Mars/She dances on cars and wears blue Saturn bras?" Eat your heart out, Donizetti.