

5 STARS

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EVERY night the television shows us the tragic events in the Middle East as Palestinians and Israelis struggle to find some path to peace.

Eleven years ago, *The Shouting Fence*, based on real events in the Golan Heights was premiered in London and it has only gained in relevance and emotional impact since then.

Director Cheryl Pickering has added several layers of drama to the original oratorio by Orlando Gough and Richard Chew, in this involving staging. The audience is divided randomly by soldiers on arrival and sits on either side of the shouting fence, of wire mesh with a runway of sand in between. They are part of the barrier, as well as members of the sundered community, represented by two choirs drawn from the Tutti Ensemble and other music groups. The stories tell of the hardship of life under military rule, of oppression by Israeli soldiers and bureaucrats. Their calls across the fence begin as domestic, almost banal, and end as a stirring anthem of Palestinian identity.

The music employs many devices and textures, from the full throated roar of one hundred antiphonal voices, to the solos, duets and ensembles for the principal voices. Two women sing verses from the Song of Solomon across, the fence, one in Hebrew, one in Arabic. There's a vaunting duet between a gospel singer and an African drummer, and all the while Richard Chew, as composer, singer and conductor prowls around the venue. The children sing a joyful nursery song as they near the soldiers, throwing rocks and then running away. There is a shot, a child dies and a mother straps on a suicide belt.

The end is quietness as the singers disperse, slowly returning to their separate homes. Their day of telling their news across the barrier is over, but, as the media remind us, it's still going on.

Operatu is the partnership between the Tutti ensemble and the State Opera of South Australia.

This is a very impressive start to the venture.

The Opera Studio, until March 28

EWART SHAW