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# Crossing the Sea, at Wilton's Music Hall, E1

**If Deidre Gribbin ever writes another piece as haunting as Crossing the Sea, she - and we - will be lucky**

Richard Morrison



To come across a new work that's carefully conceived for a mixture of different media - film, dance, theatre, a singer and a string quartet - is a rare and rewarding thing. With her husband, the theatre director Lou Stein, the Belfast-born composer Deidre Gribbin has been exploring this genre-busting territory for some time. But if she writes another piece as haunting as Crossing the Sea - her "one-woman opera" had its premiere in the suitably elegiac dilapidation of Wilton's Music Hall - she, and we, will be lucky.

Drawing its texts from 7th-century Chinese poetry, it tells a simple story. A woman waits for her lover, who is fighting overseas. She recalls their happy times, and reads his letters - at first with pride, then (as the battle looms) with trepidation. He never returns, of course. From a trunk of treasured possessions she extracts his army tunic and cradles it like a baby. As in Wilfred Owen's poetry Gribbin's subject is the pity of war. Sadly, it's a timeless theme - but perhaps particularly pertinent to someone who grew up on the Falls Road in the 1970s.

For the singer - mezzo Alison Wells, sumptuously clad in a scarlet Chinese robe - she writes a sinuously expressive line. Under this she supplies a mesmerisingly evocative string accompaniment for the superb Smith Quartet: one moment a ferociously scurrying moto perpetuo; the next a sad Celtic-tinged lament.

But that's just the musical element. Behind Wells, the film-makers Hazuan Hashim and Phil Maxwell project cinematic clips, sometimes a bit over-literal in their illustration of the text, but atmospherically presented through a gauze curtain. The spectacle is further embellished by two black-shrouded dancers, Amy Bell and Valentina Golfieri. Their ritualistic gestures, and the footage of battle-scene friezes included in the projections, intensify one's sense of the same tragic story endlessly replayed.

Stein's staging is sparse but gripping. The only weakness? Few of Wells's words emerge clearly. She sings and acts with admirable feeling, but clearer enunciation would have given this fine work even more theatrical clout.

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