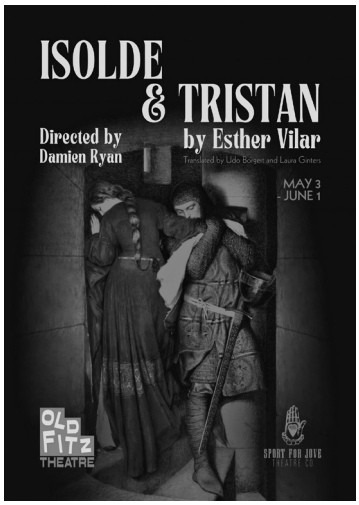
DR TERENCE WATSON'S REVIEW OF *ISOLDE & TRISTAN*

Isolde and Tristan - Sport for Jove Theatre, at the Old Fitzroy Theatre, 22 September 2023



Cast: Isolde - **Emma Wright**; Tristan - **Tom Wilson**; King Marke - **Sean O'Shea**; Soprano: **Octavia Barron Martin;** Pianist: **Justin Leong**.

Creative Team: Director: **Damien Ryan**; Design: **Tom Bannerman**; Lighting: **Sophie Pekbilimli**; Costume Designer: **Bernadette Ryan**. Translators: **Udo Borgert** & **Laura Ginters** (from the original German). A word of appreciation to the translators for the wonderfully idiomatic, witty, and direct text for the actors and the audience.

Most readers of this wonderful Quarterly will hold Wagner's *Tristan und Isolde* in high regard as one of the peaks of Western Art for its powerful music and moving story of love overcoming all odds, and for its biographical connections with Wagner's frustrated desire for Mathilde Wesendonck. His artwork distils many of the aesthetic, religious, and psychological preoccupations of contemporaneous writers and the broader German cultural life into a tautly constructed three act drama culminating in the ultimate transcendental meta-climax that takes us outside the world of the artwork into Wagner's fantasy world of *Gefühl*—unending sensuous Feeling, beyond Consciousness—"*unbewußt—höchste Lust*,"—"unaware/ unconscious—in highest bliss."

The production of German-Argentinian dramatist **Esther Vilar's** *Isolde and Tristan* by Sport for Jove is a dynamic 100 minutes on a tiny stage representing the deck of the ship Tristan is helming to take Isolde to her future husband King Marke of Cornwall. The shiny black stage, with hints of seafaring in a mast, a tiller, and a rope ladder, slowly receded into a background for an exploration of the inner worlds of the characters. The Sport for Jove multi-awarded company, founded in 2009, is a wonderfully innovative, provocative group that has presented many adventurous, powerful dramatic experiences around Sydney, including gardens, small halls and theatres, and in festivals (https://www.sportforjove.com.au/about). The play was apparently premiered in Sydney in 1997 in which Damien Ryan played in the defunct Lookout theatre in Woollahra. He knows the play inside-out! Only 55 audience members can fit into the theatre, making it suitably intimate for such a story about our supposed innermost desires and needs.

Vilar's play aspires to re-imagine Wagner's narrative from many contemporary perspectives. One of these is to strip away almost all the transcendental imaginings and plant the action firmly on the deck of the ship, as it pitches, yaws, and rolls on the ocean. However, by the end of the play, the ship has become a metaphor, like those familiar from popular culture and science: a spacecraft alone in interstellar space, a submarine deep in the ocean, or our earth circling one of billions of suns in an infinite universe. Vilar reinforces this impression by having Marke taken to the ship by longboat, as he is in Wagner's artwork. However, he decides to take a scenic nuptial cruise (to Cornwall or London is unclear). The ship is struck by storms, then becalmed, and then lost because the stars are obscured. The characters and their actions thus become symbolic of human beings trying to find love and meaning in that universe. While the stage stays still, the actors throw themselves across and onto the stage to represent the storm-struck ship, as well as being thrown, pushed, pulled onto the deck by another character. Each of the characters at some point threatens the others. This was a very physical production, unlike most productions of *Tristan und Isolde* in which the characters rarely move far or energetically.

Vilar's main strategy for what is often called "decentring" in modern literary critical theory and some philosophy is to make Isolde the main actor, and Tristan and Marke as re-actors to her various moods, stratagems, and desires. Isolde as the focus gives Vilar the chance to make telling points about the inequality and iniquity of the control to which she is subjected by the two men in different ways. Since they have all the physical, social, and political power between them, Isolde must play the cards she holds—a beautiful body, the men's desire for her, and her great intelligence and objectivity about them. One of the striking illustrations of the power plays is when Marke orders Tristan, as captain of the ship, anachronistically, to marry him to Isolde. Tristan, through gritted teeth, asks Marke if he takes Isolde for his wife and Marke agrees; then Tristan begins to ask Isolde if she likewise takes Marke, but Marke brusquely interrupts, pointing out that she is now his chattel, and she now has no right to agree or not.

A tall, willowy, striking Emma Wright grabbed the role with both hands. With an entrancingly lyrical Irish accent, she displayed the character's full-bodied presence, intelligence, belief in her own status, sense of irony and humour, capacity to take and use power, and her right to the satisfaction of her emotional life on her own terms. In contrast, Tristan is a hunky young man, good with a sword and a tiller, and an impressive, physically expressive stage presence. But he is out of his depths with this woman, who enjoys controlling him like a marionette, according to her mood and desires, so that he cannot resist his own growing desire for her. Marke is even easier for Isolde to play. Vilar portrays him as a vain, vacuous older man with an unwarranted sense of his own importance,

potency, and power, who happily succumbs to the delusion that Isolde really desires him for himself, rather than for her own ends.

The ends to which Isolde is working take us deeper into the complications that motivate Vilar's reimagining of Wagner's artwork. The first end is to take revenge on the killer of her betrothed Morald. The second end emerges slowly in the form of her desire to avenge Ireland's ignominious defeat and subjection to foreign control by marrying Marke, killing him, becoming queen, and restoring Ireland's freedom. The first end is familiar to us from Wagner's artwork, but there the desire for revenge is quenched by the love potion that releases their desire for each other; for Vilar the end is different. The second end is Vilar's way of introducing one of her main contemporary concerns by means of deliberate historical anachronisms.

Isolde and Marke make many remarks about the ways in which Cornwall has subjected the people of Ireland and the country to coercion, despoliation, and despair—essentially slavery. Vilar reinforces these anachronistic-seeming references by having the three characters refer to Marke as King of Cornwall, of England, and of Britain, and to long years of colonisation. By this means, Vilar expands Wagner's story, decentres it from a Romance, into a world of contentious, bitter relations for which Tristan and his army's conquest for King Marke stands as the Ur-crime against Ireland. In Wagner's transcendentalising of the narrative—taking it out of any real world context, we might be left to ponder that Wagner's King Marke is left to deal off-stage with the politico-social and personal consequences of the mess created by Tristan's and Isolde's death-pact. Vilar's Marke also leaves such a mess, but through different means.

While Wagner's King Marke is, for many people, the most sympathetic character in the artwork (along with Brangäne and Kurwenal), Vilar's Marke can be read as her comment on the world's primarily male political leaders. Vilar introduces Marke just over half way through the play, and he is on stage for much of the second half. Building on the characterisation she has developed for him, she suggests he is a symbol for all the deluded, venal, incompetent, brutal, greedy, lying, and stupid men who have come to dominate large portions of the world's people. Given the way in which O'Shea creates his shambolic version of King Marke, I guess he has taken some inspiration from a recent British PM.

In Vilar's take on Wagner's artwork, the ending is ambiguous, as Isolde's motivation has been throughout. One of Isolde's strategies is very familiar, and dangerous—to let the men get so drunk that they are disinhibited and physically compromised, and then spring her trap, but she also seems to drink quite a bit. A lot of Irish whiskey seems to be drunk during this production (though the level in the bottle hardly changes!). They are all drunk when Marke staggers onto the deck and finds the lovers *in flagrante delicto* and initially condemns Tristan to death, but then relents, but too late.

Isolde is equivocal about her feelings for Tristan, especially in her decision to spike her and Tristan's last drinks with the poison she has carried in her locket. In her final words she first laughs at Tristan, proclaiming her successful revenge for Morald's death, then cries, distraught, that she loves him. They die, as Wagner's characters do, Isolde on top of Tristan. To reinforce her point about the randomness of the control of power in a contingent world, Vilar's Marke dies as well, from causes that are not evident: perhaps a broken heart, perhaps alcoholic poisoning, perhaps a heart attack. The play ends with a slow fading of the light on the tableau of the three bodies, accompanied by Leong playing the final bars of the *Verklärung* (transfiguration) (commonly called *Liebestod*), but there is no transfiguration here.

The juxtaposition of played and sung excerpts from the artwork, a feature of the original production, against Vilar's decentred narrative increased the complexity of the experience, especially for those of us in the audience who are familiar with Wagner's version. At appropriate moments, the piano reduction alone, or with the vocal part, combined with the characters' reactions to each other, gave me goosebumps and brought tears to my eyes. In a less well-directed production, these moments could have been reduced to schmaltz. Here, though, the musical elements were mostly off-stage and in a dark corner so that they did not detract from the drama.

I hope that this production can be revived sometime soon for those Wagnerians, and others, who could not fit into the small Old Fitzroy Theatre, so they can enjoy this remarkably clever, well directed and acted (and played and sung) take on Wagner's take on a German take on a French Romance based on a Celtic story originating sometime in the 12th century.

As a footnote, Vilar achieved some fame in 1971 with her book *Der Dressierte Mann* (The Manipulated Man) in which she claimed, according to a New York Times interview with her by Judith Weinraub:

> "…men are slaves to women, working all their lives to support women, while women choose a life of domestic idleness, working either intermittently or not at all."
>
> "A married woman always has the choice to work or not. Men never do," said Miss Vilar, who is convinced that most women can complete their essential housework in two hours each morning.
>
> "Women always work with a net under them; they can let themselves fall. Women work for luxuries, like lace curtains and wall-to-wall carpeting. Men work because it's their responsibility to support a family."
>
> (www.nytimes.com/1972/06/13/archives/she-says-its-the-men-who-are-enslaved.html).

Unlike many "thesis" plays I've seen over the years, I did not find these sentiments dictating the form or content of the play, though, in retrospect, the play could be read as a dramatisation of the sentiments. The important criterion, though, for me, is that the play persuaded me that the characters and situations rang true, and its decentring of Wagner's artwork added to my understanding of it.