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Querini Opera, Querini Hall, Røst, Norway – review

By Shirley Apthorp

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A true-life tale of shipwrecked Venetian mariners is at the heart of this unusual work



'Querini' involves professional musicians and islanders

On a windswept chunk of rock above the Arctic Circle, a lifeboat carrying 16 Venetian sailors washed up in January 1432. After 29 days in a shepherd's hut, eating snow and shellfish, the remaining 11 survivors were rescued by the inhabitants of nearby Røstlandet. They were rowed to safety, fed, clothed and cared for on Røst – as this Norwegian archipelago is known – for four months. Then they went home, laden with dried fish, initiating a trade route that still exists today.

Nowadays the journey from the main village on Røst to the islet where Pietro Querini and his crew fetched up is just a half-hour spin in a speedboat. Anybody with a lifejacket and an obliging skipper can go and see the granite monument that Mussolini sent there in 1932 to commemorate the shipwrecked Venetian.

Røst today is home to 560 people, and, in summer, an estimated 20 per cent of Norway's seabirds. On the outermost tip of the Lofoten Islands, warmed by the Gulf Stream, Røst boasts the warmest average climate in Norway – ideal conditions for drying fish, as the Venetians discovered.

Querini's extraordinary survival narrative is the stuff of Røst's first-ever opera production, an event that quadrupled the island's population and engaged most of its inhabitants last weekend. Preserved in the Vatican's archives, Querini's story was only translated into Norwegian in 1900, but has been legend on Røst for centuries. It was the idea of Røst-born opera singer Hildegunn Pettersen to turn the tale into an opera performed on location, a project as Quixotic in conception as it is impressive in its realisation.

Querini first hit the stage on Røst in 2012. With the support of the island, the district, the national cultural fund and private sponsors, Pettersen was able to scrape together the Nkr4m (\$638,000) required to turn her vision into reality. Composer Henning Sommerro and librettist Ragnar Olsen put together a 90-minute work of music theatre for a mixture of professional musicians and island forces.

The event was such a success that it was brought back in 2014. Once again lights, technology, orchestra, soloists, seating and black-out curtains (it never gets dark on Røst in July) were shipped in from the mainland; once again extra ferries and flights were scheduled from Bodø. Medieval-style tents were erected outside the performance hall for opera-goers to mingle over beer, cake, coffee and the inevitable dried fish.

Olsen and Sommerro have created an unpretentious, effective account of Querini's story. Director Anne Marit Sæther and designer Tone Myskja's production achieves spectacular results with modest means – strips of cloth, video projections, simple wooden structures and costumes sewn over months on the island. A cormorant (jazz singer Sissel Vera Pettersen, whose bird sounds are haunting) takes the role of narrator – the birds are entwined in Røst folklore, and can also be found in Venice. Magne Fremmerlid is a formidable presence in the title role; Kjell Magnus Sandve supports beautifully as shipmate Bernardo. Anna Einarsson and Hildegunn Pettersen deliver strong performances as their spouses, while 17-year-old Anna Sofia Mørkved as island girl Inga and tenor Eivind Kandal as sailor Nicolo have one of the work's most tender moments in their sweet parting duet.

The chorus includes real-life fishermen and traders alongside the village priest, the doctor and a large proportion of Røst's children, who perform as strikingly blonde Venetians and as their own Røst forebears. Their music is simple without being simplistic, and they sing it with polish and infectious passion.

Querini came from one of the world’s richest cities to one of its most humble islands, where he was received with generosity and genuine goodness. The experience affected him profoundly: he had, he wrote, found the first circle of paradise on the archipelago. Much has changed since then – Norway is now one of the world’s richest nations, in terms of GDP per capita – but not, it seems, the uncomplicated warmth of the people of Røst, as manifested in the utterly Arcadian feel of this community arts project.

Pettersen hopes that *Querini’s* next stop will be Venice, in the corner of the city where Querini’s ship was built. She deserves to succeed. This must be the most moving work of music theatre ever to be written about dried fish.



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