

Theatre review: *Vision: The imagined testimony of Hildegard of Bingen*

CHURCH TIMES 08 MARCH 2019

Bridget West attends a touring production of a Hildegard drama



Teresa Banham as Hildegard, at a performance in Oxford of Vision, last Friday

AN “INTIMATE ‘concert-theatre’” was the billing for the medieval group The Telling’s musical drama *Vision: The imagined testimony of Hildegard of Bingen*. The experience, at Heath Street Baptist Church, Hampstead, was a personal encounter: an encounter with Hildegard and, through her, with God.

Throughout the 65-minute performance, the audience was a part of Hildegard’s life-story, feeling her emotions of pain, anguish, bewilderment, wonder, and joy, from her first experiences of seeing “the Living Light” as a young child, through her time in the abbey, and concluding with her death in 1179.

It was the overlap of, interaction between, and communication of the music of Hildegard — two voices and medieval harp — and her spoken word, delivered by Teresa Banham, which made the show such a unified,

deep telling. There were seamless transitions between the two. One would join the other to pick up the emotion; voices continued offstage while Hildegard was on her knees; she was visibly listening to them, soaking up their song, notably at “*O viridissima virga*” (O greenest branch), at which point she was in the midst of them, one beside her, the other in the gallery.



Teresa Banham as Hildegard, and Leah Stuttard, harp, at a performance of Vision in Oxford, last Friday

The voices, Clare Norburn (the writer and artistic director) and Ariane Prüssner, were well-matched, both light and clear, rich and dark, spanning a good two-octave range of the melismatic lines, verses, which Norburn had carefully selected to sit alongside the spoken passages. We heard outpouring, frenzy; angular intervals of pain; and a couple of unison passages and organum providing concord and agreement near the start and at the end.

Leah Stuttard’s harp added to the outpouring of devotion: her first entry was to accompany the “brightness of light”, and to paint the words of “*Ave Generosa*” (Hail, girl of a noble house, shimmering and unpolluted). Light, high flourishes and ornamentation represented the circling swallows; repeated slaps on the wood were footsteps in the passageway. She, too, sang, accompanying herself on an untuned handbell, full of harmonics and cast for her by the Whitechapel Bell Foundry.

The stage and lighting management by Nicholas Renton and Natalie Rowland respectively were well thought-out. The singing of Norburn and Prüssner as they moved around the church — and this continued offstage

— reflected the wandering of Hildegard’s mind and brought the audience very firmly into the telling. Much was in candlelight, lights being raised to match the story’s emotion, and the spotlight on the cross on the pulpit at the climax of Hildegard’s visions: “God shows me.”



Teresa Banham as Hildegard, with singers, Ariane Priüssner (left) and Clare Norburn, at a performance of Vision in Oxford, last Friday

Only at the end did all four women appear together, in the light, as Hildegard approached death, “ready to join Him”. In what was the “Final Processional from *Ordo Virtutum*” (Order of the Virtues), which had a feeling of the Nunc Dimittis about it, the musicians led Hildegard offstage, out of the main church building, leaving the audience to hear the voices and see the light fade.

It might have been easy to shut one’s eyes in the darkness to focus on listening and feeling the visions through this sense alone, but this would have been to miss the stand-out performance: the expression of Banham’s Hildegard — wide, pained, overwhelmed, illuminated, ready to be shown the way; we felt with her.

It may not have been billed as a Lenten devotion, but if a moment for reflection is needed, or the desire to understand more of Hildegard is to be fulfilled, it is well worth making the time for this.

Vision: The imagined testimony of Hildegard of Bingen by Clare Norburn is on tour in churches in Liverpool, Worthing, Exmouth, and Totnes until 23 March; summer dates to be announced. www.thetelling.co.uk