

Gianni Schicchi and *Pagliacci*—both dealing with deceit, illusion and death—make an apt pairing, but it was a stretch for Paula Chitty's company, 'irrational theatre'. Sung in English and played with relative realism as a contemporary sitcom, *Gianni Schicchi* wisely eschewed efforts at 'Italianism'. The mellow-voiced Ian Henderson, seasoned in G&S, was very much the lynchpin as Schicchi himself. The decision to give *Pagliacci* in Italian, no doubt in search of authentic passion, was undermined by some unmistakeably Anglo-Saxon vowels and consonants. Chitty took an expressionistic approach, with the characters as clowns throughout, and initially confined Canio—the high-octane, sometimes explosive Randy Nichol—to a cage. In an intriguing sexual twist, Tonio transitioned into Tonia, but lines for high baritone go unavoidably flaccid when sung at pitch by a low mezzo. Katy Bingham-Best did all she could to persuade us otherwise. Lovely top notes were the salient feature of Samantha Green's innocent-sounding Nedda; Pete Martin sang poetically as Beppe and Herbie Hill-Reid was a rugged Silvio. The small chorus sounded astonishingly atmospheric and, throughout the double bill, David Podd, under the musical direction of Peter Jones, made vivid music theatre at the piano.

YEHUDA SHAPIRO

Owen Wingrave

British Youth Opera at the Peacock Theatre, London, September 3

During the orchestral prelude to British Youth Opera's production of Britten's 1970 'television opera' *Owen Wingrave*, ancestral portraits were replaced by Brechtian placards carried by rifle-wielding youngsters (from the Southend Boys' Choir). The brandished bills numbered the human losses incurred in the Boer and Vietnam Wars, against a backdrop of a rollcall of the dead, indicating that in the hands of the director, Max Webster, pacifism pure and simple, rather than psychic or psychological restlessness, was to be the focus of this *Owen Wingrave*.

The opera tells of a young man's rejection of his family's militarism, a defiance which ironically requires him to act 'like a soldier' and results in his own death. Yet *Wingrave* is, like *The Turn of the Screw*, set in a country house that is a psychic repository of supernatural presences, and behind this story of youthful rebellion there lies a complex network of half-illuminated ideas. What is the relationship between Owen and a former Wingrave youth, who refused to fight a childhood friend and was beaten to death by his furious father? What has happened in the locked room? Why does Owen die?

The ending has given rise to critical conjecture, disagreement and dissatisfaction, but Webster and his designers (James Cotterill, sets; David Howe, lighting) decided to dispense with ambiguities and tell a 'straight' tale. The burden of militaristic tradition was embodied by a web of machine-guns that descended from the flies to hang oppressively over the family dining-table. The Wingrave clan raised their knives at Owen with chilling menace but he too showed angry defiance, incinerating his military uniform in a park rubbish bin. The Act 2 'peace arioso', the psychological climax of the opera, was accompanied by the hoisting of a huge white banner daubed with the CND logo.

Webster and the movement director Liz Ranken effected deft transitions between scenes, and members of the Southend Boys' Choir were used effectively, prancing exuberantly on 'horseback' as Owen lingered on a park bench to read Clausewitz. But their appearance in the final scene detracted from the pathos of the image of a dead Owen cradled by those who had destroyed him, and the strewing of poppies over the prone corpse was a cliché too far.