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DANCE ON SCREEN » THE FIDDLE AND THE DRUM

I've looked at Joni from both sides now



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Like Joni Mitchell, I have looked at clouds from both sides now. I was doing it last week, on several plane flights and on one occasion I was doing it with Joni Mitchell for company.

It was darned cloudy when I changed planes at London Heathrow. The overhanging greyness bore no resemblance to floes of angel hair or ice-cream castles in the air. There was talk of delays. At Heathrow I finally found a door and stepped outside. While reading the Irish Times I was joined by two lady employees of British Airways who had dashed out, all clattering high-heels and tight, swishing uniforms, for a coffee, a cigarette – a ciggie, to them – and a natter. Oblivious to yours truly, they nattered

with gusto.

One said to the other, “So what’s been happening with him?” (She laid a certain emphasis on “him” as if she was talking about the spawn of Satan or Tony Blair.) The other took a long drag on her cigarette, exhaled dramatically and said, “Ooooh, I dunno. I think he was only being nice to me until the test results came back.”

There followed an account of how she had arranged a rendezvous with “him,” the purpose being to “talk about fingers.” Upon arrival at the rendezvous point, by taxi, she’d been stunned to get a text message from “him,” which said – and here I quote verbatim – “No. I don’t want to talk to you.” Outrage was expressed, specifically about “the 20 quid for the bloody taxi.”

Now, maybe you had to be there, but this was more entertaining than the Irish Times editorial – a thundering denunciation of something or other – and, having some interest in the TV racket, I speculated to myself that this story could probably form the basis

for a 10-week story arc on *Coronation Street* (CBC, 7 p.m.). Her test results came back fine, by the way. In case you needed to know.

But I digress. Up in the air at last and looking at the clouds I was startled to find Joni Mitchell talking in my ear. I had the iPod on you see, and had forgotten that I’d put some Joni Mitchell on it. She was telling me about the last time she saw Richard. With time to kill and knowing that I’d be writing about Joni Mitchell for today, I gave some thought to the Mitchell oeuvre.

The Fiddle and the Drum (Bravo!, 8 p.m.) is the reason for it all. It is a TV version of Alberta Ballet’s dance creation, set to a group of Mitchell songs. Performed in February of this year in Calgary, the work received considerable attention, not merely because of the use of Mitchell’s music, but because Mitchell herself was deeply involved in its creation. Apparently choreographer Jean Grand-Maitre’s original idea was to simply use Mitchell’s best-known songs as the basis for a new work. However,

Also airing tonight

Mystery Flights (Newsworld, 10 p.m. on *The Passionate Eye*) gets a timely airing, given Maher Arar’s recent video encounter with members of the U.S. House of Representatives. A BBC production, with journalist Olenka Frenkiel doing the investigating, it looks at the so-called “extraordinary rendition” practices of the CIA, whereby terrorist suspects have been flown all over the world, without legal process, and subjected to torture. Frenkiel is especially good when questioning a very nervous Tyler Drumheller, the former CIA clandestine-operations chief.

» J.D.

Mitchell suggested a ballet that emphasized her environmental, political and social interests. She also became the designer of the work.

The result is a categorical interpretation of a very specific portion of Mitchell’s music. The dance performance is exquisite, a rush of sexy movement that’s constant on a sometimes crowded stage. The theme is deeply melancholic, obviously being a commentary about the horror of war, the destruction of the Earth and, when the dance accompanies Mitchell’s song *Sex Sells*, about greed and lust.

But the obviousness of it all is one problem. *Sex Sells* is hardly Mitchell’s most poetic or subtle work, containing such statements as “Doctors pills give you brand new ills/ And the bills bury you like an avalanche.” Later, at the point where Mitchell begins to sing the W. B. Yeats poem *The Second Coming*, things have sunk below the unobscure and a kind of chaos reigns. The couples performing on stage are galvanizing but Mitchell’s voice, skittering over Yeats’s doom-

laden metaphors, is irritating. Something is not in sync here, no matter how lovely it looks.

The other problem is that we’re essentially watching a tape of a live performance, not a work created specifically for television. Clearly, some elements have been massaged to accommodate TV, but the bursts of audience applause at regular intervals only serve to remind the viewer that the performance happened in a theatre somewhere.

There is much to admire here, especially a sequence where a small child is onstage, representing the delicacy of life and the future of our society. Still, for all the beauty and delicacy, the viewer has the feeling that, perhaps like my Heathrow moment, maybe you had to be there, at the live performance, to be truly moved and engaged. And we are reminded that Joni Mitchell’s strength as a songwriter is in the ethereality of her reflections on love, not in the heavy-handedness of her political commentary. Clouds, yes. Politics, no thanks.

» Check local listings.