

Arts & Culture

Veteran star gets the party started

JAZZ
George Benson
Eventim Apollo, W6
★★★★☆
Jane Cornwell

ON TO a stage on Broadway — Hammersmith Broadway — ambled jazz legend George Benson, 76, snappily dressed in white slacks, a black jacket and a gold medallion and waving to two tiers' worth of cheering fans, some of whom dined cabaret-style at white-clothed tables positioned down the front.

Fetching his signature bronze Ibanez guitar, the 10-time Grammy winner eased into the oh-so-smooth jazz instrumental 'Breezin'', the tune's chilled vibe quietening a crowd that was clearly busting to party. Then, mic in hand, his guitar hanging free, he was out of the gate with a string of jazz-pop anthems — Love X Love, Give Me The Night, Turn Your Love Around — that had people dancing, smooching and hollering along, his voice rich and low, his delivery impeccable.

There were deviations: the sound of bagpipes replicated on guitar, the vocally tricky, aurally pleasurable Moody's Mood, Nat King Cole's Unforgettable and Fats Domino's I Hear You Knocking — cherry-picked from Benson's current 45th album, Walking to New Orleans. To finish, Benson gifted us his famed version of the Drifters' On Broadway, reaching to shake outstretched hands before ambushing off, his star power undiminished.

SAMANTHA Womack describes the role of Rachel, the unstable, alcoholic anti-heroine in *The Girl on the Train*, as the most challenging she has ever played. The theatrical adaptation of Paula Hawkins's bestseller — about a woman who thinks she has seen a shocking incident from the window of her commuter service, and gets drawn into a murder story — sees her careening across the stage drunk and slurring her words in an intense performance.

It comes to the West End next week but has been on tour since January, and since Womack — best known for playing Ronnie in *EastEnders* — is never off stage for the entirety of its two hours, it's fair to say it's been taking a toll on her.

"It's hardcore and stressful because I'm being shouted at, I'm shouting a lot and I'm crying a lot, so I'm having to tap into something deep inside me and my body is releasing a lot of cortisol. Everyone in rehearsals kept asking how I was going to keep it up. At the beginning, just realising I could get through the dense dialogue was a relief. Rachel's thoughts are so incoherent that the lines were much harder to learn than if it had been a smooth narrative, so I had to play word games to memorise them."

When the play opened, the 46-year-old — who has two teenage children with her husband, actor Mark Womack — found herself heading straight to the pub afterwards, only to awake in the morning with "a slight hangover", which took her to what she calls a "very melancholy place". After two months she started to feel depressed and traumatised. "It was like a floodgate had opened." Her GP stepfather persuaded her to take up meditation for five minutes before and after each performance, which, together with a health-and-exercise regime, seems to have calmed her down.

Still, Womack insists she "absolutely loves" the character of Rachel, "a very unusual heroine, not like say Bridget



Full steam ahead

THEATRE
Samantha Womack's role in *The Girl on the Train* takes her right to the edge. **Katie Law** hears what it's like to play a woman on a dark trip

MANUEL HARRAN

Jones. We all talk about Bridget as being a 'real' woman but she's not. We're a lot darker and more dangerous than that.

"Women are unruly, vindictive and self-destructive. Fleabag touched on it, but again, it's a twee, middle-class version. There are moments when I think

I can't believe Rachel just said this, or did that. I've never had that before, because normally as an actor you want the audience to like you — there's an ego attached — but Rachel's the one at the party who pees herself."

Womack discovered that the more she

channelled Rachel's bad behaviour, the more she could let go of her own inhibitions, the more convincing her performance became and the more the audience loved it. She stopped wearing make-up, apart from theatrical "bruise" powder — rust-coloured powder that turns a

mottled blue-black when rubbed in. "Rachel is so petulant and rude that even though she has a lot of victim self-pity, she doesn't need to be liked."

She wears mismatched clothes — a stained coat and trousers that are too big "so I'm always having to hoist

Women are unruly, self-destructive, vindictive. I like Paula Hawkins's recognition of that'

them up", she says, going googly-eyed and lurching forward, as if inebriated. "I've got better at being the drunk as I've become more free."

The one person whose opinion Womack cares about is Hawkins, who came to rehearsals and the press night and sat "very quietly and respectfully... She's an observer but the eyes told me everything. The novel is about coercive control and obsession, feeling isolated and broken. I really liked her recognition of that ugliness in women." The actress would have liked to get to know her better, by "getting her drunk in the pub", but so far it hasn't happened.

Womack is confident that this adaptation, directed by Anthony Banks, is more faithful to the book than the 2016 film starring Emily Blunt and set in New York. "You need to have these soliloquies to the audience, and that feels like a more loyal interpretation." There's also the essential familiarity of English trains looking out on to suburban Victorian terraces with extensions and conservatories spilling out to the railway.

Womack was born in Brighton, and her biggest regret is not going to university. She left school at 15 and went to theatre school for a year, leading a nomadic life. "I was like a performing seal. I sometimes wonder how many decisions in my life were conscious?"

None. I was always surviving and reacting to circumstances. I took jobs that would pay for my keep and it's only now, in my late forties, that I can ask myself, what do I want to do? I was always too busy working but now I can enjoy that aspect of my life."

● *The Girl on the Train* is at the Duke of York's Theatre, WC2 (atgtickets.com), from tomorrow until Aug 17.

Ambassador Theatre Group was a partner for the Evening Standard Theatre Awards 2018

Flute that magically spikes sexist perceptions

OPERA
The Magic Flute
Glyndebourne
★★★★☆
Barry Millington

THE Franco-Canadian director-designer team André Barbe and Renaud Doucet claim to have declined offers to tackle *The Magic Flute* on the grounds of its sexist and racist aspects. The latter are indeed present, though some commentators prefer to blame the librettist, Schikaneder, believing that Mozart's musical setting actively confronts such prejudices.

Countless modern directors have subverted the stereotypical views of an earlier age, and Barbe & Doucet find their own ingenious solutions. The oracular pronouncements about women needing a wise man's guidance are held up for ridicule, while the face of the villain

Monostatos is blackened by soot from a furnace rather than by race.

Acknowledging the tradition of the original production at the suburban Freihaus-Theater auf der Wieden, the sets are painted drops, all meticulously hand-drawn by Barbe. But the action itself is located in and around the kitchen and wine cellars of a fin-de-siècle Viennese hotel. Sarastro and his priestly cult wear risible variants of chefs' headgear. Pamina sails through her trial by demonstrating she can outcook any chauvinist male chef, Tamino becoming chief washer-up. Suffragettes demanding votes are chased by policemen.

David Portillo and Sofia Fomina are excellent as the heroic couple Tamino and Pamina. Brindley Sherratt is a weighty Sarastro, while Björn Bürger is outstanding as Papageno, his vocal delivery as lithe and engaging as his acting. Caroline Wettergreen's ambivalent Queen of the Night fearlessly commands the stratosphere, even interpolating extra high notes, though the result as yet sounds a mite mechanical. Ryan Wigglesworth's stylish direction of the OAE is irreproachable.

● Until August 24 (01273 815000, glyndebourne.com)

Extra high notes:
Soprano Caroline Wettergreen

Ravishing sounds of a visit to the planets

PROMS 2019
Bournemouth SO/Karabits
Royal Albert Hall, SW7
★★★★☆
Barry Millington

WITH his billowing locks and elegant pastiche tail-coat, the Franco-Serbian violinist Nemanja Radulović cut a dash before playing a note. But his beguilingly sensuous tone and eloquent phrasing were immediately apparent and perfectly attuned to the genial expressive qualities of Samuel Barber's late Romantic Violin Concerto.

The concert had opened with the exhilarating rollercoaster of John Adams' Short Ride in a Fast Machine. The

rhythmic tautness of the Bournemouth Symphony Orchestra under Kirill Karabits was notable both here and in Holst's Planets, especially the war-heralding Mars.

Most impressive of all were the ravishing celestial sonorities (strings, harps, celesta, softly voiced wind and brass) produced by the Bournemouth players in Venus, Saturn and Neptune. The Trinity Boys Choir's tuning in the fiendishly challenging wordless chorus that ends the work was admirable.

The now apparently statutory applause between movements at the Proms destroys both the contemplative mood and the unity of a work like *The Planets*.

● *The BBC Proms* (bbc.co.uk/proms) continue until Sept 14



ARTS & CULTURE TOMORROW

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STARS SHELLEY VON STRUNCKEL

Aries March 20 – April 19
For you, as an Aries, being forced to delay taking action because of pointless rules is hugely frustrating, and you feel that if you don't complain, then it's somehow a compromise. It's not. In fact, busy yourself with something else. **0904 470 1141** (65p per minute)*

Taurus April 20 – May 20
Various obligations are preventing you from making lasting commitments. Out of character as it may be, get involved. Within days you'll have a better understanding of what's possible and what you want. **0904 470 1142** (65p per minute)*

Gemini May 21 – June 20
The benefits of being ruled by clever Mercury include both a quick mind and a lively sense of humour. Yet during its period of retrograde movement, from July 7, you've been focusing on the past, which can explain a lot. **0904 470 1143** (65p per minute)*

Cancer June 21 – July 21
You've recognised that brooding over unresolved issues achieves little. Mostly, that's true. However, you've resolved certain tricky matters that surfaced this month. Finally, you understand them and know what to do or say. **0904 470 1144** (65p per minute)*

Leo July 22 – August 22
Few things frustrate you more than facing pointless delays. While irritating, they're preventing you from taking action you'd soon regret. The less hurried, and the more flexible arrangements are, the better off you'll be. **0904 470 1145** (65p per minute)*

Virgo August 23 – September 22
As a clever, analytical Virgo, you've a talent for devising a solution before others even realise there's a problem. At the moment, certain individuals are convinced all is absolutely perfect. Tackle these matters diplomatically. **0904 470 1146** (65p per minute)*

Libra September 23 – October 22
Recently, you were increasingly optimistic about one particularly tricky individual beginning a more easygoing cycle. But they've returned to their former difficult character, and you're better off accepting them as they are. **0904 470 1147** (65p per minute)*

Scorpio October 23 – November 21
The Sun confronting both the stern Saturn and your own ruling planet, Pluto, has triggered powerful and revealing discussions and events out in the world. Challenging as facing these have been, you're now reaping the rewards. **0904 470 1148** (65p per minute)*

Sagittarius November 22 – December 20
You're beginning to recognise that recent setbacks haven't just forced you to slow your pace, but cornered you into reviewing arrangements you've regarded as unchanging. It's now clear those changes are inevitable. **0904 470 1149** (65p per minute)*

Capricorn December 21 – January 19
Having to make last-minute changes in certain pivotal plans was bad enough. Mostly, this meant rethinking things, which demand both time and further investigation. But the insights gained have made up for the effort required. **0904 470 1150** (65p per minute)*

Aquarius January 20 – February 17
After a period as exciting as it's been unsettling, the concept of a single, lasting, plan is appealing. However, judging by the tricky planetary activity involving the Sun, things are unlikely to be much calmer. **0904 470 1151** (65p per minute)*

Pisces February 18 – March 19
When others are impatient, you often worry that you've done something to upset them. However, once you've talked things through, you'll realise it's not your fault and, even better, help calm them down. **0904 470 1152** (65p per minute)*

IF IT'S YOUR BIRTHDAY TOMORROW...

Everybody gets busy, with life, with loved ones, friends and family and with the world around you. Yet it's time to focus on someone who often comes last, and that's you. This means both reviewing past situations where you've short-changed yourself or said 'no' when you should have said 'yes'. In every case, you have a rare opportunity to return to those, or similar, matters and follow your dream or put other passions first. And you can begin today.

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