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Into the Little Hill at the Linbury Studio, Royal Opera House

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Most musicians like to adjourn to the bar after a show. But until Saturday I'd never seen an opera adjourned to the bar in mid-flow.

We were halfway into the British stage premiere of George Benjamin's Into the Little Hill - a brilliant reworking of the Pied Piper legend - when disaster struck. All the lights went out in the Royal Opera House's Linbury Studio, just after Martin Crimp's libretto had spookily reached the line: “What are those sparks? Rats feeding on electricity.” And, embarrassingly for the ROH (which had a £200 million refit a decade ago) they stayed out. For 25 minutes we sat in the dark. Did nobody know where the fusebox was? Then they allowed us into the bar (where the lights, mysteriously, were on) and gave us a drink. Another hour drifted by. But rescuing John Fulljames's high-tech Opera Group production with its complex text and image projections proved impossible.

So Benjamin, who was conducting, uttered something like “Let's do the show right here!” And suddenly the musicians of the London Sinfonietta were seated with instruments and music, the two singers - Claire Booth and Susan Bickley - perched at the bar like Brigitte Bardot and Jeanne Moreau in Viva Maria! and the rest of us squatting on the floor for the next 40 minutes. And in that confined space it was mesmerising. There was nowhere to hide from Booth's marvelously angry, protesting Child and Bickley's mendacious Minister, slyly making a pact to exterminate the rats (ie, feared “outsiders”). Nor from the visceral power of Benjamin's score - by turns eerie, abrasive, sad and lyrical. And Crimp's clever twist on this familiar tale, turning it into a parable of political cynicism, xenophobia and social dysfunction, seemed coruscatingly topical. Who needs lights?

Earlier, Harrison Birtwistle's Down by the Greenwood Side had passed without technical hitch. Normally this vicious morality tale - including graphic baby-stabbing and a dismembering - would have upstaged everything. Here it was comprehensively eclipsed.