

Review by Joyce McMillan – The Scotsman
SONGBIRD ****

THE BRIDGE, EASTERHOUSE

THERE'S a tendency for children's theatre to take a bells-and-whistles approach to the art-form, with performers seeking constant reassurance in the form of obvious audience reactions. Here's a new touring show though, that takes an entirely different approach. It's serious, moving and dignified; it treats its audience, aged eight and over, like real junior theatregoers, capable of taking on board some powerful and substantive themes. And beyond that, this beautiful 45-minute tone poem – written and composed by David Paul Jones, and conceived and directed by Katrina Caldwell – also adds something to the current rapid development of music theatre in Scotland; not least because of the astonishing synthetic languages in which Jones has written his libretto.

Through 11 distinct and beautiful songs, the story tells of a lovely, vulnerable songbird, exquisitely played and sung by Judith Williams, whose rainforest is destroyed by fire when a towering female figure of western commerce, fabulously embodied by soprano Rachel Hynes, comes to clear the land. The destroyer finds the bewildered songbird, and captures it for her own; she takes it to a western city, where the songbird is displayed and exploited as an exotic performer, before dying of grief and homesickness, and leaving its owner stricken with a terrible sense of loss.

Brian Hartley's set is as clever and effective as his beautifully feathered songbird costume. And with the help of a little comic by-play from David Paul Jones as the pianist, and cellist Robin Mason, the children in the audience are held rapt from beginning to end.