THE TIMES
Bricks&Mortar
Max 24C min 5C
Friday June 20 2014 | thetimes.co.uk | No 71228
Only 60p to members £1.20

Opera
Quartett
Linbury Studio, ROH
★★★★☆

Nasty, noisy and noxious, Luca Francesconi's opera is not for the faint-hearted. Quite a few people walked out, perhaps because they thought they were getting a witty musical adaptation of *Les Liaisons dangereuses*. Well, there is music — though of the most pungent, avant-garde kind — and the two characters on stage for 80 minutes do indeed come from Laclos's 1782 novel.

This, however, is *Liaisons* filtered through the bleak gaze of the 20th-century German playwright Heiner Müller. He sees this reunion of Valmont and Merteuil, both bitter, twisted and at the end of their days, as "a reflection on the problem of terrorism". If by terrorism we mean a pitiless, scruple-free attempt to impose one's view on someone else, one can see his point. Valmont and Merteuil recall past seductions, even act them out, but only as a way of taunting the other. I won't reveal the ending, but it's not dinner and a movie. And all this is matched by Francesconi to music — electronic, pre-recorded samples and live orchestra (the excellent London Sinfonietta under Andrew Gourlay) — as barbed as the insults on stage.

It's not a joyous show, then, but in John Fulljames's intense production I found it engrossing, especially the interaction between two brilliant singer-actors: Kirstin Chávez as the dishevelled but scompetitive Merteuil; Leigh Melrose, out-sneering even John Malkovich (if such is possible) as a posturing, sardonic Valmont who has clearly crossed into insanity and a nihilism born of an inability to love the one person who understands him. They play their endgame on a platform over the orchestra. The other elements in Soutra Gilmour's set are giant chemises hanging from the roof and melodramatically lit to suggest that, though these two characters have retreated into a warped interior world, there is the small matter of the French Revolution outside.

Richard Morrison

Box office: 020 7304 4000, to Jun 28