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Caamora

She

Review by Bill Knispel

Everything bigger than everything else. That seems, in many ways, to be Clive Nolan's modus operandi. From his work in Arena, to albums such as *Jaberwocky* (with Oliver Wakeman), Nolan's taken symphonic/melodic progressive music to its most over the top limits. And *She* is no exception. The first full length release from his latest project Caamora, this sprawling 2-CD concept album based on H. Rider Haggard's Victorian novel *She: A History of Adventure* is just about everything one would expect from this prolific British musician.

Nolan is not alone on this release; wisely, he's taken on a number of other voices to help realise the main characters for this work. Joining him are Pallas frontman Alan Reed, Magenta chanteuse Christina Booth and newcomer Agnieszka Swita. Also joining this collective from an instrumental standpoint are well-known bassist John Jowitt (IQ), guitarist Mark Westwood (Neo) and Scott Higham (ShadowKeep) on drums. Wisely, Nolan has also enlisted an actual string section to thicken and enrich the lush orchestral musical landscapes he's crafted, rather than relying on synths and keyboards to create a thinner, more digital backing.

She is more than just a neo-prog album; in many ways, it's the closest thing to a full-blown rock musical that I have heard arising from the progressive rock world. There are countless moments I could easily see being staged on Broadway, and there's a tunefulness that is both memorable and at times almost cloyingly sweet. Enjoyable in general, *She* is perhaps best taken in a live setting, where theatrics and staging perhaps help to offset the 2 hours of bombastic music Nolan has written for this project.

Track by Track Review

Disc 1

Overture

"Overture" sets the scene with passionate vocals from Agnieszka Swita, while musically several themes that will be revisited throughout the piece are introduced here for the first time. The title might suggest a fully instrumental piece, yet this is in fact a full song with vocals throughout. Perhaps a more fitting title would be "Prologue" rather than "Overture," as it serves more of a story-based introduction than a musical one.

The Storm

A nice, fast paced rocker with impressive double kick drumming, Alan Reed, Clive Nolan and Agnieszka Swita trade off vocals throughout this piece. Coming out of the slower, building "Overture," this piece really kicks things into gear and drives the listener along for a wild musical and vocal ride.

The Veil

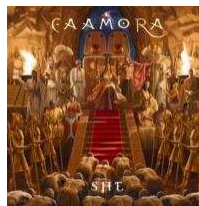
Alan Reed's vocals are the highlight of this composition, his slightly husky tenor voice imparting additional emotion and power. Reed was an inspired choice for this project; while not as well known (sadly) as other singers than might have been considered he has a way of presenting material that immediately grabs and holds the listener in his thrall. Westwood shines on acoustic guitar at the very opening, while some great organ playing courtesy of Clive Nolan fills out the middle of the mix nicely.

Covenant of Faith

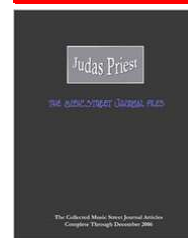
Nolan and Reed harmonize on this piece that moves the story forward, as the two explorers make a statement of purpose, refusing to turn back from the quest they are on. Mid-tempo, stripped back and basic, it's a pleasant piece that helps from an exposition standpoint.

Rescue

Fantastic choral vocals and eastern-tinged acoustic guitars are added to powerful vocals from Christina Booth to create one of the most impressive set pieces on this release. "Rescue" is fantastically scored and arranged, creating an almost visual effect through the music and singing. This is the first genuine hair-raising moment on *She*, and one the entire group of musicians should be rightly proud of.



[Return](#)



The Lost City

An ornate, almost Baroque opening theme leads the listener into "The Cave," where our adventurers (Nolan and Reed) are led toward the presence of Ayesha, She Who Must Be Obeyed. Booth is again the female voice, and she mixes incredibly well with Reed and Nolan. A heavily synth-driven piece, this is again slightly more scene-setting and less expository.

The Bonding

A tribal beat pulses under Christina Booth's solo voice here. There are some wonderful lyrical turns of phrase here... "We are the eye of the storm - We are the solitary ones/The closer we are, the tighter we hold - The stronger we shall become." From a story line standpoint, this is an important track, as it sets the scene for things that will happen later in the album. As a piece, it is an impassioned love song that never descends to syrupy, saccharine-sweetness. Booth's emotional delivery is genuine and powerful in intent.

Ambush

The story of *She* drives along as our adventurers (Holly and Leo, Reed and Nolan respectively) and Ustane (Booth) are found by a group of rebels, intent to punish them for their crimes against the society which Ustane calls her own. They are "rescued" at the very end, only to find themselves in a potentially more perilous position. The piece opens powerfully with a heavier rock vibe before the vocals begin with a slower rhythm, synth backing, and each singer taking his parts in turn.

Musically, this song moves through more ornately arranged sections to vocal/single instrument backing moments with ease. Despite this, these shifts do break momentum to a lesser or greater degree. At its best, the song is powerful indeed; it's too bad that this power couldn't be maintained throughout the piece.

Judgement

The titular character makes her first full appearance on this piece, opening the third scene of Act/CD 1. As the title implies, Ayesha (Agnieszka Swita) renders judgment on the two outsiders, sentencing them to death for the crimes they have unknowingly done in her name. Again, we have a wonderful lyrical turn of phrase that says as much about the world today as it does the story: "But this is not perfection and fear is still a weapon." The oboe line on this track for some reason reminds me of "Carol of the Bells" from time to time, which makes for a strange juxtaposition against the intense lyrics and vocals.

History

Ayesha gives Holly (Reed) a choice and a chance to save the injured Leo (Nolan): tell her of what has happened in the outside world and she might find it in her heart to spare them and heal Leo, nearing death. Reed's vocals are impassioned and powerful, telling her of the myriad things that have happened during the two thousand years Ayesha and her people have lived in seclusion. At the end, a short interlude brings us to a small antechamber where the body of Leo lies, near death. She is taken aback, as he has the form of her past lover and husband, made flesh again. She prays she is not too late, and the emotion is palpable.

Confrontation

Yet not all is as it seems. Ustane, as we saw before, has fallen in love with Leo, and Ayesha realizes this. She confronts her courtier and demands an answer, declaring that only She has the power here. Ustane rises up, accusing her of jealousy and weakness. The battling of vocals is incredibly intense, with Booth and Swita both pouring every bit of their being into this battle of wills. Again the listener sees that to Ayesha, there is only black and white; Ustane can flee and save her life, or remain and die. At the very end, both decide to take the road fate has declared their own; Ustane flees, yet one can be assured this will not be the last time she is seen or heard. Ayesha begins her vigil over the body of her former lover, apparently reincarnated in Leo's form.

Vigil

A similar musical theme (in fact, it may well be exactly the same one) as heard in the opening strains of "Confrontation" opens this piece. Left alone with Leo, Ayesha pours out her heart, begging him not to fall into the arms of death. The music sets off Swita's vocals wonderfully, with synth strings and harp wring out every drop of intensity from her voice. Moments near the end of the song feature Swita hitting notes in a manner which, combined with the musical backing, elicit comparison to Annie Haslam and Renaissance...yet another literally hair-raising moment. As the penultimate track for Act/CD 1, this is an intense one indeed without once touching on anything that could be called rock.

Shadows

With Leo mystically recovered from his fatal wounds, both he and Holly are brought back into the presence of Ayesha, where Leo declares his intent to follow her wherever she may lead. Neither have any idea who the Kallicrates is she refers to, yet Leo again declares his intent to follow. Ayesha asks him not to be hasty, as her domain is darkness. This group vocal section leads to a piano ostinato and a vocal showcase for Swita, singing in a lower, throaty register that is at once ominous and disconcerting. One might almost think that she is "losing it" in character, before one of the largest melodic hooks this side of classic pop radio arises, bringing with it one of the more powerful melodic lines and vocal performances on the whole album. The song builds in intensity through this section, closing out the first half of the album in fine form indeed.

Disc 2

Fire Dance

The second act begins with a flourish on "Fire Dance," as a large orchestral chord is hit and held, leading to an ominous musical theme. The music opening this track is grand and cinematic in scope, truly fitting the concept of an overture to its fullest. Nolan's vocals take on an almost operatic timbre at first, followed shortly by Reed and Swita in turn. One might be worried that the second half of this piece might open weakly, but "Fire Dance" takes care of those fears quickly. From a story line standpoint, this is an important piece as well, as it begins to set up the eventual denouement of the entire work.

Cursed

During "Confrontation" (on CD 1), Christina Booth as Ustane is sent away by her queen, having been given the choice of life in exile or death. Here we see her return, in a powerful scene where Swita follows through on her threat. Enraged with jealousy, as well as anger at having been ignored by one of her subjects, Ayesha curses Ustane to death. The music matches the scene for intensity, with moments of heaviness that come close to rivaling metal from a power standpoint. Scott Higham's drumming is again a highlight, handling the slower sections with grace while pounding it out where necessary.

Closer

A gentle elegy, Booth begs Reed and Nolan closer as she passes from this world to the next one. This is a track that really changed this reviewer's perception of the album, and began to push the material much closer to the world of musicals than rock. Booth's vocals are fragile and pained, matching the gentleness of the arrangement.

Disbelief

This mood is broken as she passes on, and Leo and Holly turn to Ayesha in anger, demanding an answer for what she has done. The song builds in intensity as she tries to justify her actions, finally beginning to reveal all to them as the story line continues.

Murder

Jaunty acoustic guitar may create the idea that this track will be a bright one, but one look at the title closes off that avenue of thought pretty quickly. John Jowitt's bass line is powerful and driving, and some of the string/wind parts sound uplifting, but Swita's vocals are delivered in a breathy rush, as if the years of holding back a horrid secret are forcing her to tell everything at once. There are some nice melodic hooks in here, but "Murder" is pretty much a showcase for Swita's vocal skills, and here she impresses fully.

Eleventh Hour

Having told her tale, Ayesha turns to Leo and asks him "Are you sure that you could kill me/Can you truly claim my life?" Leo (Nolan) is at once confused, as he begins to fall for her. An eerie piano-esque theme runs under their initial vocal parts, and with a crash, intense musical backing underpins some powerful duet vocals from Nolan and Swita. This would be an impressive piece in a live setting.

Resting Place

I have to admit the opening beat didn't sell me on this track...the faux-electronica feel seems quite at odds with the grandiose music which typifies much of the album. Swita's vocals are sweeter than on any other part of the album as she sings to Nolan, presenting to him and Leo the perfectly preserved body of Kallicrates. Swita's exposition ends as she draws Leo in, destroying the body of her former lover and declaring her intent to remain with Leo for eternity.

The song shifts to a heavier rock mode, with a tasty Mark Westwood solo leading back to a more strident, powerful female vocal. As Nolan enters the song, the music becomes uplifting, helping to elevate one of the biggest hooks the album has to offer. Almost arena rock at its very best, the song

moves from less than impressive to one of the more memorable ones on the album inside of three minutes' time.

Sands of Time

"Our destiny lies days away - Our answers are defined." There is a sense of impending activity here, as Nolan, Swita and Reed's vocals all take on an added edge. Reed asks what will happen to their quest, while Leo replies that his path has been set, and that his journey was apparently always leading him. A synth line cycles, building intensity in the same way a quick violin ostinato would on a suspense film soundtrack. The pounding, nearly dinosaur beat that drives the choral vocal sections seems almost larger than life.

Embrace the Fire

Nolan and Reed share a final moment as adventurers and friends before Leo takes the final step...to walk into the Fires of Life and embrace immortality with his queen Ayesha. Rich piano tones set off Reed's husky tenor wonderfully, leading to a slightly skittery rock beat that is more reminiscent of his work with Pallas (or Nolan's material with Arena). The brotherly love the two have shared seems lesser than the new found love Leo has found with his lost love, yet there is a sadness heard in both of their voices as they realize that this is both an ending and a new beginning.

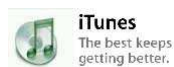
The Night Before

As the title implies, Ayesha and Leo share a moment together before they take the final step together toward an eternity of love and togetherness. Swita's vocals are warm and loving, while a hint of tension can be heard in Nolan's voice as he voices his questions. Layered, harmonized guitars sound like Brian May in the background, a sound that is oddly fitting for the restrained elegance of this powerful ballad. The comparisons to May continue through a brief solo around the 2:00 mark, mimicking him at his bluesiest.

Fire of Life

She closes out with a massive 10-minute epic that tries to jam several scenes' worth of action into a can barely designed to fit it all. Things start out well enough, with both Ayesha and Leo ready for him to walk through the fire. As they walk toward the fire, something happens. Waiting in the fire for Leo, the fires of life reverse their mystical workings on Ayesha, aging her 2000 years in the blink of an eye. At that moment, the mountain which held the fire begins to crack, raining down fire as Ayesha's powers fade along with her life. The music matches this, intense, imposing, signaling impending doom. Reed begs Nolan to come with him, telling him "This cruel volcano craves our death."

A short interlude sounds almost like another song entirely, as the spirit of Ayesha appears, begging Leo to wait for her, as she will return for him one day. The gentleness is a welcome respite from the imposing music and breathless vocals that precede it, yet the respite is brief, as a reprise of both the last vocal themes and the initial orchestral themes lead the listener out on a powerful note.



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