

Poet Chris Tutton and international harpist Lucy Nolan. Image: Malvern Pen & Ink festival

# Poetry and harp are transcendent

Review by Brian Owen

SOME performances invite you simply to listen while others invite you to step inside.

Imaginary Landscapes, the quietly mesmerising collaboration between poet Chris Tutton and international harpist Lucy Nolan, belongs unmistakably to the latter.

The work of gentle immersion sees poetry and music merge into a single drifting current of sound, image and thought.

From the opening moments at Malvern's Coach House Theatre, Nolan's harp establishes an atmosphere of luminous stillness.

The instrument itself, crafted in Italy from specialist woods and taking a year to make, seems almost to breathe under her hands.

That she is only weeks away from welcoming a baby boy adds an unexpected tenderness to her presence – serenity and radiance held in perfect balance.

Tutton's first sequence of poems, centred on coastlines, dusk and the fragile edges of memory, arrives with his characteristic clarity and emotional poise.

His voice is calm, resonant and assured with the distilled intensity that has earned him praise as 'the master of the short poem'.

He delivers each line with a powerful yet unforced manner, shaping silence as carefully as sound.

Nolan responds with textures that feel like weather – muted strings, breath like resonance and small searching motifs that echo the imagery without ever overwhelming it.

The interplay between poet and harpist is instinctive and deeply attuned, a partnership built on listening as much as performing.

Neither leads, neither follows, they simply inhabit the same imaginative space.

The programme deepens as they move into the 'human landscapes' poems of longing, connection and the quiet drama of everyday life.

Nolan's playing warms, becoming more melodic, occasionally touching on folk-coloured phrases that seem to rise directly from the emotional undercurrent of the text.

The sense of shared intuition between the artists is striking and the audience feels gently drawn into their dialogue. At the centre lies the longer sequence that gives the performance its name.

Tutton's words unfold like a slow turning panorama, each line opening onto another imagined horizon.

Around him Nolan's sound world shifts – drones, layered arpeggios, high register patterns that flicker like light across water. Time seems to loosen.

The boundary between poem and music dissolves.

It is the most immersive section of the programme and the audience appears suspended between inner and outer worlds.

Later sequences move into shadow and nightfall.

Tutton's poems explore solitude and the edge of dreams while Nolan ventures into more experimental territory – pedal slides, prepared string effects and echoing motifs that fade like memory.

Yet the closing moments return to brightness.

Poems of renewal and gentle optimism are paired with lyrical harp writing that settles the hall into quiet contentment.

The final chord hangs in the air long after the performers fall still.

A short question and answer session followed with the audience eager to engage.

Several thoughtful questions were fired their way, all answered with generosity, insight and humour.

Tutton shared his rail journey to the venue had involved several diversions, a detail that added warmth to the exchange.

The audience were clearly thrilled, responding with the kind of attentive enthusiasm that marks a performance which has genuinely touched people.

What makes Imaginary Landscapes so compelling is not simply the beauty of its components but the integrity of its partnership.

Tutton and Nolan listen to each other with rare attentiveness, shaping a performance that feels less like a recital and more like a shared meditation.

Atmospheric, contemplative and quietly transformative, it is a journey through inner and outer worlds to a place where poetry becomes music and music becomes landscape.

If you would sum up in a single word – transcendent would do!

■ Brian Owen reviewed the play on Friday, August 21.