

Arts in Review -- Opera: Love in Surprising Places

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Abstract:

The 2016 Festival Season The Santa Fe Opera Through Aug. 27 Santa Fe, N.M. -- The Santa Fe Opera's 60th season presented several pieces that rank just below standard repertory status, making strong cases for each of them with polished productions. "Don Giovanni," directed by Ron Daniels and designed by Riccardo Hernandez, recalled an older Santa Fe Opera, with less built scenery than the other productions.

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The 2016 Festival Season

The Santa Fe Opera

Through Aug. 27

Santa Fe, N.M. -- The Santa Fe Opera's 60th season presented several pieces that rank just below standard repertory status, making strong cases for each of them with polished productions.

Director Richard Jones and designer Miriam Buether staged Puccini's Gold Rush drama "La Fanciulla del West" in small spaces: The raucous miners in Minnie's ramshackle saloon seemed crowded together against the wild emptiness of the frontier outside, while big emotions filled the tiny cabin where Minnie and the sheriff Jack Rance played cards for the life of the bandit Dick Johnson. Mr. Jones's acute direction conveyed the opera's key theme of loneliness.

A top-flight cast sold the splendid tunes of this underappreciated score. Patricia Racette brought warmth and honesty to the tough girl Minnie, playing mother and sister to the miners while holding out for true love; Gwyn Hughes Jones came on strong with his forceful, exciting tenor as Johnson, her unexpected prince; and Mark Delavan brought an appropriate harshness to the embittered Rance. Emmanuel Villaume conducted with sweep and urgency.

Samuel Barber's "Vanessa" is a twisted version of that same "one true love" plot: In Gian Carlo Menotti's dark libretto, Vanessa has waited 20 years for a man who left her; when his opportunistic son arrives to take his father's place in her affections, her niece Erika recognizes him as an imposter in every way, but Vanessa does not. Unlike that of "Fanciulla," Barber's score is all about stifled and fabricated feeling, and James Robinson's production captured its frozen paralysis. Vanessa's rich house was all silver and white with a wall-sized, shattered mirror. Allen Moyer designed the sets; James Schuette, the luxurious costumes; Christopher Akerlind, the stark lighting.

Erin Wall's explosive soprano embodied Vanessa's delusions; with her full-bodied mezzo and physical stillness, Virginie Verrez made Erika's momentary awakening and ultimate choice of permanent repression chilling.

Despite some high-note problems, Zach Borichevsky suggested Anatol's fakery well; James Morris was touching as the sentimental Doctor; Helene Schneiderman was a ghostly presence as Vanessa's disapproving mother. Leonard Slatkin conducted with a clinical precision that reached its zenith in the dark disappointment of their final quintet.

Director Stephen Lawless and designer Ashley Martin-Davis moved Gounod's "Romeo et Juliette" overseas and to the approximate period of its composition: the height of the American Civil War. It worked. The whole opera was played in a gray, semicircular mausoleum with names on the wall, a constant reminder of internecine strife. It smoothly metamorphosed to suggest the different locations, just as the huge black mourning dresses and

bonnets of the Prologue were stripped off to reveal white party frocks for the ball. Frere Laurent was a hospital doctor, tending to the dying, as well as a priest, and the bedroom scene began with Tybalt's funeral, glimpsed upstage.

Stephen Costello was a stunning Romeo, his tenor beautifully poised and free, ardent without pushing. As Juliette, Ailyn Perez's soprano had a strident quality and some pitch insecurity. Raymond Aceto was a sympathetic Frere Laurent; Elliot Madore sounded constrained as Mercutio, but he was agile in the sword fight; and Emily Fons made the page Stephano's baiting of the Capulets particularly nasty. The chorus was excellent, and Harry Bicket's luminous conducting had a Gallic delicacy, especially in the magical, moonlit ending of the balcony scene.

"Don Giovanni," directed by Ron Daniels and designed by Riccardo Hernandez, recalled an older Santa Fe Opera, with less built scenery than the other productions. A giant bronze bust, looking a bit like the head of the Oscar statuette, loomed over the proceedings. When Don Giovanni's reckoning finally arrived, Marcus Doshi's lighting and Peter Nigrini's projections made it into a grinning skull: Apparently Death had been waiting all along. The opera's locations can be hard to follow if you don't know it well, and Mr. Daniels's prosaic direction wasn't helpful. Emily Rebholz's mostly handsome costumes (Donna Anna's unflattering ones excepted) provided some illumination.

The cast offered some excellent low male voices: Daniel Okulitch as an arrogant Giovanni, though without the hint of desperation that makes him more interesting; Kyle Ketelsen as a showboat Leporello, Solomon Howard as an imposing Commendatore, and Jarrett Ott as a seething Masetto. Edgaras Montvidas had a mixed night as Don Ottavio, losing vocal focus in Act II. Of the women, Leah Crocetto (Donna Anna) did her best work in Act I; Keri Alkema was an emphatic Donna Elvira and turned in a solid "Mi tradi"; Rhian Lois was a pert Zerlina. John Nelson's routine conducting couldn't prevent some pit-stage coordination lapses.

Santa Fe's founder, John Crosby, had a particular passion for Strauss, and the composer's operas were a repertory mainstay under his leadership. He gave "Capriccio" its American premiere in 1958, the festival's second year. "Capriccio" is a challenge: Essentially a debate about whether words or music are more important, it is very talky. And it requires both wit and voluptuous Straussian ecstasy, since the victor is never in doubt. This season's production, conducted by Leo Hussain and directed by Tim Albery, was certainly witty. The elegant set, designed by Tobias Hoheisel, placed Countess Madeleine's home in the American Southwest in the 1940s, with an 18th-century music room (a nod to the original time period of the piece) nestled in otherwise modernist decor.

The debates between the poet Olivier (Joshua Hopkins) and the composer Flamand (the sweet-voiced tenor Ben Bliss) were lively, and David Govertsen was hilarious as the director La Roche, who believes in entertainment above all. The high point of the evening was a comic octet in which all the characters let loose with their opinions. Alas, the final solo scene, in which the Countess contemplates her choice, suffered from Amanda Majeski's thin, monochromatic soprano and some scrappy orchestra playing -- so words, rather than music, unexpectedly won.

Ms. Waleson writes about opera for the Journal.

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