

Chicago Sun-Times

Glover-Paulus team creates a superb 'Don Giovanni' for Chicago Opera Theater

May 2, 2008

BY ANDREW PATNER

Dark. Very dark. Beautiful. Disturbing. Provocative. Hilarious. Chilling. Engrossing.

Chicago Opera Theater has scored another triumph with its new production of "Don Giovanni," the last of the Mozart/Da Ponte trilogy to be taken up by the company's superb partnership of conductor Jane Glover and director Diane Paulus.

Their seventh project together, "Don G" forms a sort of bookend with the invigorating take on Monteverdi's "Orfeo," which introduced them to Chicago -- and to each other -- eight years ago. There, launching Brian Dickie's first fully planned season as COT's general director, we had the excitement of new -- to us -- talents and the fizz of a fresh collaboration.

Here we have a fully matured partnership where both artists share an understanding of the work and read each other implicitly. With this authority, everyone -- from the hugely talented young singers to the experienced design team of Riccardo Hernandez (sleek sets), David C. Woolard (wonderfully tongue-in-cheek costumes) and Aaron Black (spooky lights) -- is working here as a part of a unity.

The lack of such a shared vision is where innovative productions often go wrong (and make no mistake, this is not your grandmother's "Don Giovanni") and why audiences sometimes roll their eyes when they see or hear that something has been "updated."

But Paulus is not applying some sort of Eurotrash applique to the well-known story of the ultimate -- in more ways than one -- rake and his demise. And Glover is not thrashing around in the pit at cross purposes with the stage action. Rather the two artists are taking the daring qualities of Da Ponte's telling of the Don Juan legend -- its harshness, boldness and cold matter-of-factness -- and the equally complex ways that Mozart tells the story through musical shifts and surprises and offering them in a very serious way.

This is the first Don of many I have seen, for example, who actually makes you feel uncomfortable in your seat and who gives you a real sense of why his servant Leporello fears him as much as he finds him a theatrical-type character. When Scottish bass-

baritone Iain Paterson, in his U.S. debut, sings that he knows no fear of death and cares not for the views of others concerning right and wrong, we absolutely believe him. And shudder.

As the uncommonly put upon Leporello, Minnesota native Matt Boehler makes a wonderful Chicago debut as the Don's enabling manservant. With a rich, dark voice and both physical and vocal agility, the bass-baritone helps us to see why his character cannot leave a master he despises.

To those who think that highlighting the sadomasochistic dependency here is too much, or who question the placement of this 1787 *dramma giocoso* in a contemporary strip-and-sex club, one has to ask, what do you think the story of a man who has had 2,065 "successful" conquests is about? It is not surprising that it has taken a team of two strong and insightful women to give us such a compelling and frightening answer. There is also much practical sense at work here -- the club is a logical setting for the kinds of connections that the Don lives on, and it also provides a reason for the mismatched crew of *dramatis personae* to run into one another constantly, something that can make little sense in the sprawling city of Seville.

Canadians Rhoslyn Jones, soprano, as Donna Anna, and Michael Colvin, tenor, as Don Ottavio are well-matched as the opera's second odd couple and do more to humanize their characters than one sees in many a stand-and-sing grand opera production; COT veteran soprano Krisztina Szabo similarly gives her Donna Elvira a beautiful and seductive three dimensions. With triumphs at the Metropolitan Opera and the Chicago Symphony Orchestra this season, mezzo Isabel Leonard is luxury casting as Zerlina, again seen as much more than a prop here, and her Masetto, Ben Wager, seems on an upward trajectory.

Paulus has found one of the most convincing solutions that I have seen to the problem of the murdered Commendatore as inanimate and then animated statue; bass Andrew Funk carries it through with an appropriately icy chill.

Glover is on top of the score from the first cold chords of the overture to the fiery sounds of Hell at the opera's end, moving things along with the natural fluidity of a true Mozartean.

The Harris Theater was full on opening night Wednesday -- another success for this company that spends little money (even with rising costs, they have kept their annual budget at a remarkably low \$3 million) but makes few artistic compromises. You may not come out of this season opener whistling happy tunes, but you will have a sense that you understood Mozart and Da Ponte's examination of the dark sides of human character as never before.

Andrew Patner is critic at large for WFMT-FM (98.7).

<http://www.suntimes.com/entertainment/music/classical/927840,CST-FTR-COT02.article#>