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Chicago Opera Theater debuts with bold 'Coronation' Chicago Opera Theater baptizes new home with flawless 'Coronation'

By John von Rhein
Tribune music critic

The glossy glorifications of lust and ambition to be seen at your neighborhood multiplex or in Super Bowl halftime shows can't hold a candle to "L'incoronazione di Poppea." With his final opera, written 362 years ago for Venice, composer Claudio Monteverdi raided ancient Roman history to produce a devastating study of the emperor Nero's court, a decadent world awash in sex and corruption. Has any music since written for the stage probed its characters with greater psychological depth or complexity?

With this latest entry in their Monteverdi cycle for Chicago Opera Theater, conductor Jane Glover and director Diane Paulus have given us a bold contemporary perspective on this Baroque masterpiece that leaps across the centuries with astonishing immediacy.

"The Coronation of Poppea," which opened COT's 2004 season Wednesday night, marks the company's debut in its handsome new home, the \$52.7 million Joan W. and Irving B. Harris Theater for Music and Dance, at Millennium Park.

With its clear and giving acoustics, the hall is a splendid, intimate place for opera. This in itself represents a triumph of the grand vision Alan Stone had for Chicago's second opera company when he founded Chicago Opera Studio (as it was then known) 30 years ago. Fielding first-rate ensembles of promising young singers was Stone's hallmark, and so it is with his successor, Brian Dickie.

Dickie's discerning eye has given us a "Poppea" (which I caught in dress rehearsal) that is as close to flawless as a production can be: admirably sung and acted, imaginatively staged and stylishly performed by a dream ensemble of period instruments under Glover's direction.

The Monteverdi "Orfeo" Glover and Paulus put together for COT in 2000 was a model of how old operatic wine can be poured into shiny new bottles; so is their "Poppea." Robert Brill's spare sets, David C. Woolard's modern costuming and Allen Hahn's stark lighting draw telling parallels between the sleazy hedonism of Nero's palace and the glitzy vulgarity of a Vegas pleasure dome. Leather miniskirts, Tom Cruise shades, Ferragamo shoes and other trendy fashion accents make their points without camping up the story or junking up the stage.

The singers encircle the raised orchestra pit on what looks like a fashion runway. This ensures that Glover's instrumental ensemble is literally at the center of the action, also that the audience is deeply involved in the saga of how the bewitched emperor (Michael Maniaci) and his scheming mistress, Poppea (Danielle de Niese), crush every obstacle before she is crowned the empress of Rome.

Glover, working from her own edition of the score, makes judicious cuts that guarantee a smooth running time of about three hours. Every interpretive choice she makes finds its apposite gesture in Paulus' stage direction. Presiding at one of two harpsichords (David Schrader plays the other), Glover secures wonderfully precise, colorful and fluid playing from the strings and the all-important continuo group of theorbos, gambas, violone and keyboards. If the beating heart of "Poppea" is its richly inspired score, her direction reminded us of the music's crucial importance.

The casting of the women's roles proves especially strong. Danielle de Niese's Poppea is an absolute knockout. If the American soprano isn't the most luscious-looking singing actress ever to have portrayed opera's first sex bomb, one would be hard put to name a superior. Her bad-girl poses come straight out of an MTV video, while her revealing negligees would make Janet Jackson blush. Did I mention she sings ravishingly, too, with all the floating, sensuous lyricism the role demands?

When De Niese's Poppea and Maniaci's Nero blend voices at the end, and the stage is flooded in passionate red, you will hear a great love duet sublimely sung. Maniaci is a highly musical and expressive example of that rare species of singer known as a male soprano, and he makes the emperor a believably weak, arrogant, insecure despot.

As Nero's spurned wife, Ottavia, mezzo-soprano Krisztina Szabo stole her every scene with her powerful, mahogany voice and deeply poignant immersion in the empress' plight. The other virtuous characters — Ingela Bohlin's delectable Drusilla, Tobias Cole's sturdy countertenor Ottone, Meredith Arwady's comic Arnalta and Robert Pomakov's grave Seneca, the doomed philosopher — all were impressively sung. The gods of Fortune, Virtue and Love were taken by Kara Shay Thomson, Sarah Gartshore and Adam Benkendorf, respectively.

"Poppea" repeats at 7:30 p.m. Friday, Thursday and Feb. 28, also at 3 p.m. Sunday; phone 312-704-8414.