

MUSIC REVIEW

COT scores a triumph in 'Return of Ulysses'

By John von Rhein
Tribune music critic

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It has taken Chicago Opera Theater nearly seven years to complete its cycle of the three surviving Monteverdi operas in productions by conductor Jane Glover and director Diane Paulus. The spare but potent realization of "The Return of Ulysses" ("Il Ritorno d'Ulisse in Patria") that opened COT's spring season Wednesday in the Harris Theater at Millennium Park makes the wait worthwhile.

The moral of "Ulysses" would seem to be that even the meddling of the gods in human affairs cannot stay the course of true love and constancy.

On one side are the deities Jove (Jason Collins), Minerva (Fiona Murphy) and Neptune (Darren K. Stokes), for whom mortals are mere pawns on a cosmic chessboard. On the other side are Queen Penelope (Marie Lenormand), stoically awaiting the return of her husband, Ulysses (Mark Le Brocq), from the Trojan War. Disguised, he slays her greedy suitors and convinces her of his true identity before they join in a sensuous love duet.

"Ulysses" is positively Shakespearean in its fusion of heroic, tragic and broadly comic elements. Paulus has made the highly stylized conceits of early Italian Baroque opera feel as fresh to modern ears as the tangy, colorful continuity of sounds Glover, working from her own edition of the score, elicits from her fine period-instruments orchestra.

Together they inspire a large, mostly young ensemble -- typical of general director Brian Dickie's shrewd casting of singers -- to make the words and notes of this text-driven opera really matter to us. The result is living, breathing drama that speaks with a contemporary voice. And that's important in a three-hour work containing little action and long stretches of recitative over bare instrumental accompaniment.

The unit set by the celebrated architect Rafael Vinoly abstracts the island of Ithaca into a minimalist, multi-leveled construct, with folding doors that disclose blood-red interiors suggesting the decadence of the court. Simple ancient-modern costumes and pastel lighting by Aaron Black add to the show's stark, clean look. Less is emphatically more here: An undulating blue cloth and puffs of dry-ice fog are enough to represent Neptune's oceanic realm.

At Wednesday's opening, the long first half was slow in gathering a full head of dramatic

steam, with its allegorical prologue and various subplots. But one's patience was amply rewarded in the more eventful second half.

Lenormand, with her rock-solid technique, wrapped her red-burgundy mezzo securely around Penelope's inner sufferings, although she needed to make more of the queen's ultimate awakening from cynical skepticism to rapturous certainty. The eloquent tenor Le Brocq made every painful step of Ulysses' homecoming memorable.

The superb, honeyed tenor Nicholas Phan (as Ulysses' and Penelope's son Telemachus) and the marvelous tenor Robin Leggate (as the shepherd Eumaeus) joined Le Brocq to render a deeply moving recognition scene. Melina Pineda (Melanto) and Edmundas Seilius (Eurymachus) were most appealing as the young lovers.

Glover was kept busy presiding over a stylish continuo group that included her on one of the two harpsichords. The firmness yet flexibility of her conducting went a long way toward freeing Monteverdi's masterpiece from the dry shackles of antiquarianism and showing us the beating heart within the music drama.

"The Return of Ulysses" plays through April 7; phone 312-704-8414.

jvonrhein@tribune.com

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