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OPERA REVIEW

## An Opera Festival's Local Focus

Opera Omaha's inaugural ONE Festival expands the artform while taking a special interest in its Midwestern setting.



A scene from 'Proving Up' PHOTO: JAMES MATTHEW DANIEL

By Heidi Waleson

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Omaha, Neb.

Opera Omaha's inaugural ONE Festival, running through April 22, embraces opera's roots with its tentpole production, Cherubini's "Medea," which plays next weekend in the Orpheum Theater. But more importantly, the festival expands the boundaries of the form with artist-led events (James Darrah is its overall artistic director) and relates it explicitly to this Midwestern city. "Proving Up," a harrowing 75-minute new opera by Missy Mazzoli and Royce Vavrek, performed at Kaneko, an arts center in a converted warehouse, is a dark meditation on the region's past. Based on a story by Karen Russell, it examines 19th-century western migration through the lens of failure; the promise of the frontier is experienced as a nightmare.

Mr. Darrah's savage production kept the border between the real and the surreal deliberately unclear. It established the atmosphere right away: The audience sits on either side of Adam Rigg's set, a long, dirt-covered catwalk with two shallow graves at the center. The Zegner family is waiting to "prove up"—to gain title to their land—which, according to the Homestead Act of 1862, they can do if they have been in residence for five years, planted crops, built a sod house and possess a glass window, "the final strangeness." They have the window—purloined from a neighboring farmer, who proved up and mysteriously disappeared—but are barely holding on.

There's no rain, Pa drinks, and the oldest son, Peter, is inexplicably injured and mute. Two daughters have died, but they are very much in evidence, a pair of glaring, "Shining"-like figures in white tulle (Chrisi Karvoniades-Dushenko did the costumes). Matters go from bad to worse, as the younger son, Miles, sets out to take the window to a neighboring homestead so that both families can use it to prove up, since an inspector is supposedly on the way. Caught in a freak blizzard, Miles instead encounters the shadowy Sodbuster, who personifies the family's final destruction.

Ms. Mazzoli's expert score, ominously insinuating and brutal by turns, depicts the family's duress and upsets expectations throughout. Even as Pa (John Moore) enters, singing the jaunty, optimistic 19th-century song with the line "Uncle Sam is rich enough to give us all a farm," individual members of the small orchestra contradict him with eerie riffs. As Miles (the touching tenor Michael Slattery) rides off on his mare, made of a washtub, a sawhorse and a bucket, his seemingly exultant aria is strangely slow, as if his fear and weariness belie his confident words. The Sodbuster, sung with riveting authority by Andrew Harris, occasionally segues from his lowest bass register into falsetto and back again; his appearance is accompanied by creepy harmonica lines, played by the dead daughters as well as instrumentalists.

As the daughters, Abigail Nims and Cree Carrico add female voices to the vocal texture (Ms. Mazzoli writes terrific, intricate ensembles with overlapping text) and are menacing figures, representing the implacable elements that defeat the pioneers. Talise Trevigne's rich soprano embodies Ma's stoic resignation. Sam Shapiro was the silent, trembling Peter. The splendid International Contemporary Ensemble, ably conducted by Christopher Rountree, was a character in its own right, with eccentric instruments like a harpsichord and hanging guitars hit with a mallet contrasted with a bit of country fiddling—a painful, almost mocking, hint of normal life. "Proving Up" comes to the Miller Theater in New York in September; it will be interesting to see how it reads in a traditional proscenium house.

Even more ingenious was “The Wreck,” created in 10 days by Annie Saunders, a Los Angeles-based director who specializes in site-specific theater pieces and was lured to Omaha by the promise of raw, empty spaces. A collaboration with composer Mariana Sadovska and designer Kate Fry, the 55-minute work takes off from the Little Mermaid/Rusalka story of the spirit creature who leaves water for land and suffers for it; it explores a distinctly female experience of domesticity, alienation and escape with a captivating mix of music and text. Played in a long room filled with 1950s-era household appliances and furniture, with the audience sprinkled among them, “The Wreck” is structured around recordings of Anne Sexton reading her own poems; their power defies the male voice that refers to her in the beginning as an “alcoholic housewife.” The astonishing live performers are the alter-ego singers—soprano Mary Femeinar, costumed as a '50s housewife, and mezzo-soprano Annie Rosen, in gilded mermaid makeup—along with four improvising musicians from ICE (Rebekah Heller, bassoon; Clara Warnaar, percussion; Nuiko Wadden, harp; and Katinka Kleijn, cello).

Nothing is predictable: A Latin chant by Hildegard von Bingen is followed by Ms. Sadovska's tight harmonies vocalized in a deliberately harsh, Eastern European folk style. A snippet from Lucia's mad scene (Donizetti) and Dido's lament (Purcell) are hauntingly arranged for two voices and the instruments. The six performers play the “I'm going on a trip and I'm taking...” word game; at one point, the lights go out and crashing sounds are heard all around the space, climaxing in a frantic bassoon improvisation. Yet the narrative fits together; and even though, as was the case with Anne Sexton, it includes the eternal operatic tropes of female madness and suicide, “The Wreck” is a persuasive expression of complex female feeling.

Free festival events, held in art galleries, include “The Dharma at Big Sur,” Adam Larsen's enthralling, immersive video installation showing the surf, redwoods, rocks and beaches of California as a recording of the 2003 John Adams piece for electric violin and orchestra plays. And for those who want to get inside the opera sausage factory, director R.B. Schlather, conductor Geoffrey McDonald, and several game singers and ICE members are spending six two-hour sessions deconstructing Handel's “Ariodante.” The session I attended focused on pushing the players into exaggeration—reveling in the King's “patriarchal pomposity” and turning a betrothal dance into a “jug band” jam. It was funny, if not terribly Handelian, but pushing limits is what the ONE Festival is all about.

—Ms. Waleson writes about opera for the Journal.

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