

The New York Times

Bold Strokes in the Country

Glimmerglass Offers an Ambitious Spread of Works

Published: July 22, 2013

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Nathan Gunn and Andriana Chuchman in Lerner and Loewe's "Camelot."

COOPERSTOWN, N.Y. — Ambition has never been in short supply at the Alice Busch Opera Theater, the cozy 900-seat auditorium that long housed the Glimmerglass Opera, and now is the principal setting for its successor, the Glimmerglass Festival. But even measured by the high standard this annual affair has sustained, this year's festival — which runs through Aug. 24 here — rises to new levels of innovation, curiosity and, yes, chutzpah.

Make no mistake, that's meant as praise. It takes a certain kind of fearlessness to conceive and execute a summer series in which the most conventional offering is Wagner's "Flying Dutchman." One of two shows directed by Francesca Zambello, the festival's renowned and provocative general and artistic director, the production is the first Glimmerglass staging of one of Wagner's canonical works. ("Das Liebesverbot," Wagner's second opera, was mounted here in 2008, during Michael MacLeod's brief tenure at the helm.)



Karli Cadel/The Glimmerglass Festival
Ryan McKinny as the title character
in the Glimmerglass Festival's
production of "The Flying
Dutchman."

Compared to last season's notorious topical updating of Verdi's "Aida" — and to the other works in this year's festival, which include a popular Broadway musical, a fascinating pair of staged vocal works not intended for the theater, and a rare Verdi flop — "The Flying Dutchman" was presented in an essentially traditional manner. But Ms. Zambello's resourceful, riveting conception, seen on Thursday, still illuminates fresh depths and currents in this Wagner seafaring tale.

Credit the casting with at least part of the effect. The seaman of the title may have been cursed to wander the seas for eternity until finding a woman willing to pledge fidelity. But in Ryan McKinny, a lithe, handsome bass-baritone outfitted by the costume designer Erik Teague in a leather jacket worn open to expose a full-chest tattoo, Ms. Zambello offered a Dutchman who seemed unusually close in age and bearing to Senta, the virtuous young woman whose love could provide his salvation.

The lustrous soprano Melody Moore played Senta with a reckless passion that matched Mr. McKinny's brooding intensity, their interactions suffusing the goings-on with an unmistakable erotic charge. Mark McCullough's vivid lighting and James Noone's stark set — a towering metal scaffolding that frames the stage; Senta's bed; billowing sheets; and dangling ropes — intersected in ways that blurred distinctions between reality and feverish dream.

The tenor Jay Hunter Morris, a Wagnerian hero to be reckoned with after his portrayals of Siegfried at the Metropolitan Opera and the San Francisco Opera, gave a powerfully sung, physically impassioned account of Erik, Senta's discarded lover. Peter Volpe's bluff Daland injected a welcome note of levity. Adam Bielamowicz, a tenor, was a bright steersman. And the conductor John Keenan elicited properly elemental surges and billows from the Glimmerglass Festival Orchestra.

Despite recounting the torrid tale of the rise and fall of King Arthur's Round Table, "Camelot" (seen on Friday night) contained few comparable frissons of intensity or passion. Directed by Robert Longbottom with elegantly spare sets by Kevin Depinet, sumptuous costumes by Paul Tazewell and sensitive lighting by Robert Wierzel, this Lerner and Loewe chestnut offered bright whimsy, understated heartache and a string of good tunes, well sung and played.

The suave baritone Nathan Gunn, the Glimmerglass Festival's artist in residence this season, unsurprisingly made for a handsome, secure Lancelot. Andriana Chuchman, a winsome soprano, sang sweetly as Guenevere, bringing out the role's devilish streak especially well. But the standout performance was David Pittsinger's charismatic, nuanced Arthur, touchingly characterized and nobly voiced.

Two musical-theater actors, Wynn Harmon as Merlyn/Pellinore and Jack Noseworthy as Mordred, did lively work. Clay Hilley, Noel Bouley and Wayne Hu, all from Glimmerglass's exemplary Young Artists Program, were admirable knights. The chorus sang and danced well, and the conductor James Lowe drew a delicious performance from the orchestra.

"Passions," a new production that opened on Saturday night, ventured furthest from standard notions of operatic fare. Conceived by Ms. Zambello as a means by which to stage "The Little Match Girl Passion," David Lang's 2008 Pulitzer Prize-winning work for vocal quartet, the event paired a new arrangement of that piece with a dance-oriented rendition of Pergolesi's 1736 "Stabat Mater," directed by the choreographer Jessica Lang (no relation to Mr. Lang).

The Pergolesi work, a reflection on Mary's suffering at Christ's Crucifixion, fluctuates between somberness and ecstasy, shadow and light: a complex mix brilliantly personified by the soprano Nadine Sierra and the countertenor Anthony Roth Costanzo, complemented by Mr. McCullough's deft stage illumination and Speranza Scappucci's eloquent conducting.

The singers interacted with eight members of the Young Artists Program cast here as dancers whose movements combined gracious flow and arresting gesture. They fleetingly evoked images of crucifixion and the Pietà within a triangular frame, intersected by two huge, rough wooden beams that rose and fell in crosslike configurations.

The triangular frame was retained for "The Little Match Girl Passion," directed by Ms. Zambello with Dickensian garb designed by Beth

Goldenberg. Low benches and wooden railings lent sensations of church and courtroom alike: a pertinent sensation, given Mr. Lang's transformation of Hans Christian Andersen's tale into a quasi-sacred rite.

As in the original version of Mr. Lang's work, four adult singers — Julia Mintzer, Lisa Williamson, James Michael Porter and Christian Zaremba, all from the Young Artists Program — recounted the tale, augmenting their voices with spare percussion. But here, some passages were reassigned to the Glimmerglass Festival Children's Chorus, whose youthful vulnerability lent new pangs to an already wrenching piece.

Ms. Zambello's pictorial conception sometimes seemed at odds with the lean, haunted quality of the music. The most devastating performance was also the most understated: Victoria Munro, a chorus member who portrayed the Little Match Girl, conveyed volumes through facial expressions and postures alone. David Moody, the conductor, provided a cohesive account; "When We Were Children," a choral prelude composed for the occasion by Mr. Lang, sounded less secure on opening night but will surely steady with repetition.

Sunday brought another opening: "Un Giorno di Regno," Verdi's second opera, presented here as "King for a Day" in an English adaptation by Kelley Rourke. A tale of a decoy King of Poland who averts two calamitous marriages and enables two proper matches (one his own) during a visit to a nobleman's house, the opera was a flop at its premiere, and nearly caused Verdi to give up composition.



Karli Cadel/The Glimmerglass Festival

From left, Andrew Wilkowske, Jason Hardy and Jacqueline Echols in the Glimmerglass Festival's campy reimagining of a trimmed-down "King for a Day," a rare Verdi flop.

Verdi was too hard on himself, and history has been unfair to a work marred only by a muddled libretto and unripened compositional resources. Prudently trimmed, the work emerges as a Rossinian lark with a handful of limpid arias that aspire to Donizetti. Ms. Rourke's clever, quirky libretto, easy to follow and hard to resist, tidies up some of the original opera's messy bits.

Christian R ath, the director, embraces camp and slapstick, down to the whimsically askew sets and natty 1960s business attire by Court Watson. Eric Sean Fogel provides antic choreography; Joseph Colaneri, recently named the Glimmerglass Festival's music director, secured buoyant accompaniment from the orchestra.

The cast embraced the undertaking, every role conveyed with pizzazz. Alex Lawrence, a young baritone, was sensational as the rascally Belfiore, the decoy king of the title. Ginger Costa-Jackson was a commanding Marchesa, posturing lavishly, teetering uproariously and, not least, singing with magnificent security.

The feuding Baron Kelbar (Jason Hardy) and La Rocca (Andrew Wilkowske) were superb; Patrick O'Halloran and Jacqueline Echols sang sweetly as the pining young lovers, Edoardo and Giulietta. One more performer deserves mention: as the baron's secretary, an invented character, the soprano Sharin Apostolou stole scene after scene with her whimsical expressions and flamboyant moves.

The Glimmerglass Festival runs through Aug. 24 at the Alice Busch Opera Theater, 7300 State Highway 80, Cooperstown, N.Y.; (607) 547-2255, glimmerglass.org.