

THE WALL STREET JOURNAL.

At the Glimmerglass Festival, a Season of Salvation

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August 14, 2013

Cooperstown, N.Y.



Karli Cadel/The Glimmerglass Festival
Ryan McKinny as the Dutchman in 'The Flying Dutchman.'

'Passions," a double bill, was the most unusual offering of Francesca Zambello's third season as artistic and general director of the Glimmerglass Festival, and its most compelling. Neither Giovanni Pergolesi's "Stabat Mater" (1736) nor David Lang's "The Little Match Girl Passion" (2007) was conceived as a work for the stage, but in their Glimmerglass pairing they proved to be theatrical and complementary as they entwined baroque and contemporary responses to religious experience.

In "**Stabat Mater**," eight dancers and two singers collaboratively enacted the journey from solitary mourning to shared faith. Director Jessica Lang's choreography was effective if a little generic, and Marjorie Bradley Kellogg's set design of logs by turns suggested a cross and an altar rail. Countertenor Anthony Roth Costanzo's distinctive, penetrating sound blended well with Nadine Sierra's softer-grained soprano. Speranza Scappucci was the capable conductor.

Pergolesi's intensity acted as a strong counterpoint to Mr. Lang's spare and haunting "**The Little Match Girl Passion**," based on a Hans Christian Anderson fable: A poor girl, fruitlessly trying to sell matches on a cold winter night, lights her wares to keep warm, sees visions of comfort, and finally freezes to death. Mr. Lang's piece follows the arc of Bach's St. Matthew Passion. The child's suffering and death are associated with that of Jesus, and the severe, a cappella setting, in which the telling of the story alternates with chorales that comment and respond to it, has a similarly wrenching effect.

In the new version of the piece that Mr. Lang created for Glimmerglass, four adult singers, playing simple percussion instruments like bass drum and tubular bells, sang the often clipped and abrupt storytelling phrases, and a children's chorus sang the chorales, like the painful echo of Christ's cry of "Eli, Eli," and the final hymn of consolation, "We sit and cry." Hearing children sing this challenging music about a child's death made the piece even more harrowing. So did the production: Beth Goldenberg's subdued, late-19th-century costumes, Mark McCullough's misty lighting, and Ms. Zambello's streamlined direction suggested a passion play in an orphanage. Mr. Lang also wrote a strong introductory piece for the children's chorus, "When we were children," using different translations of a text from St. Paul, and layering metronomic lines with sung drones. David Moody was the excellent conductor.

Ms. Zambello marked the year's composer celebrations with productions of Richard Wagner's "**The Flying Dutchman**" (1843) and Giuseppe Verdi's "King for a Day" (1840). The 914-seat Alice Busch Opera Theater is small for Wagner, and the "Dutchman" orchestra, led by John Keenan, sometimes got out of hand. However, the production boasted an excellent Dutchman, Ryan McKinny, whose rich bass-baritone and imposing presence brought unusually human, sexy and even pitiable depths to this cursed ship's captain who is endlessly seeking a woman to redeem him.

Ms. Zambello staged the opera as a young girl's romantic fantasy—the curtain went up on Senta kneeling on her bed as the storm that drove the Dutchman to her shores raged around her. James Noone's set of girders and ropes suggested a stage rather than a ship, but the outlines of the Dutchman's disheveled ghost sailors dangled with wonderful demonic creepiness from the rigging against Mr. McCullough's lurid red lighting, and Erik Teague's plain, buttoned-up costumes for most of the cast threw the Dutchman's fur collar, buzz-cut head and bare, tattooed chest into high bad-boy relief. Melody Moore brought lyricism and hysteria to the obsessed Senta. Her encounters with the Dutchman had intense adolescent fervor and she strangled herself with one of the ropes at the end. Jay Hunter Morris sounded thin and acidic as Senta's rejected suitor Erik, Peter Volpe was bluff and oblivious as her greedy father Daland, and the fine chorus was a spirited asset to the show.

"King for a Day" (Un Giorno di Regno) is a bel canto comedy in the Gioachino Rossini vein, but you would never have known it from the bumptious version here. Joseph Colaneri conducted as if with a sledgehammer, and Christian R ath's production felt like a battering ram, with one pratfall after another. Kelley Rourke's witty English adaptation was the only light spot.

Court Watson's sets featured a baffling series of picture frames, and his costumes updated the proceedings to the 1950s, chiefly, it appeared, so that Belfiore—who is pretending to be the King of Poland—could don an Elvis mask at the end and everyone could do the Twist. The story is comic absurdity: Two brides are about to be unwillingly married off to rich and/or titled elderly mates, and the "King" helps prevent the matches. Alex Lawrence was amusing as the fake King, Andrew Wilkowske brought impressive command of text to La Rocca, one of the unwanted husbands, and Jacqueline Echols was a creamy-voiced Giulietta, one of the brides. However, Ginger Costa-Jackson, though theatrically game, could not cope with the high range of the other bride, the Marchesa, and Patrick O'Halloran was taxed by the role of Edoardo, Giulietta's true love.

One of Ms. Zambello's innovations is to present classic musicals, unamplified, with opera singers in the principal roles. Alan Jay Lerner and Frederick Loewe's **"Camelot"** (1960) is a creaky, sentimental piece, but David Pittsinger sold it in a splendid turn as Arthur, and Andriana Chuchman did nice work with Guenevere's winsome moments, though she was less convincing when things turned tragic. Nathan Gunn captured some of Lancelot's comic egotism, but he was more concerned with singing a beautiful line than projecting text and character. Jack Noseworthy, a music-theater performer, was a nicely smarmy Mordred. Paul Tazewell's costumes were prettily medieval, but Kevin Depinet's sets looked cheap, and the too-small chorus (perhaps to save on costume costs) sounded underpowered. Robert Longbottom's direction didn't have the snap of last year's "The Music Man." James Lowe's conducting approximated the score's romantic sweep, but you can't have a civilization fall to pieces with only a dozen people on stage in front of an all-purpose painted drop. Musical, like operas, cost money.