



# Haunting, beautiful *Dutchman* sets sail at Glimmerglass

July 29, 2013

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If an evocative and provocative crowd-pleaser is your preferred summertime fare, then catch the new production of Wagner's *The Flying Dutchman* at Glimmerglass Festival.

*Dutchman* was Wagner's first unabashed hit, deservedly so. It is a classic tale of redemption through love, masterfully scored, inspired by a stormy voyage the composer himself made and Heinrich Heine's retelling of the legend. A tormented seafarer must wander the earth aimlessly, mired between heaven and hell, because of a deal he made with the devil to save his ship. The curse of being "undead" can only be lifted through the enduring love of a true and faithful woman.

Wagner's soaring score was well sung – big, beautiful voices in every vocal range, not to mention the choral numbers that are balm to any soul longing for musical beauty and power, from the dancing sea dogs and swabbies who sounded hale even after a night of carousing to the choir of heavenly women's voices singing their spinning chorus "Summ und brumm".

*Dutchman* was exquisitely rendered by an orchestra huge by Glimmerglass standards that never played better, and that supported but didn't overwhelm the singers. Likewise, the blood-red sails of the ghost ship, the many ropes and all the stage play with them, and haunting images such as silhouetted ghostly mariners climbing the rigging and other special lighting and sound effects combined to create a moving theatrical experience marked by sudden and shockingly dramatic mood changes – pathos, longing, loss, and love.

As for being a provocative production, director Francesca Zambello's *Dutchman* was innovative by American standards. She imbued the work with sexual innuendo and content. Sexual content? Wagner? As written, Wagner's work has about as much overt sexual content as a Jane Austen novel. Desire and longing are ever present, but usually understood rather than expressed outright. But express they do in this version, whether it's the spinners stroking the thick ropes in their hands and then gyrating on them between their legs, or Senta, the sea captain's daughter, fated to redeem the Dutchman, and all of her aching to touch him and be touched by him. As directorial choices go, it might have been better to either remain coy and understated throughout, or embrace a full-on Christopher-Alden-type perversion of the story rather than straddling both styles in one production.

In the title role, bass-baritone Ryan McKinny sang with power and beauty. As Erik, the spurned intended of Senta, Metropolitan Opera veteran Jay Hunter Morris sang with an emotional intensity not customary for Erik, who can come off as a milquetoast character. Throughout the performance, I would have liked McKinny to sing with more raw emotion evident in his facial expression and body language – though he was essentially a dead man, he didn't have to act like one. For McKinny, more genuinely tortured affect

was in order. Additionally, I had greater expectations for Jay Hunter Morris who, after all, sang Siegfried at the world's largest opera house. I thought he'd probably have stronger chops than I witnessed. Last evening, his voice sounded strained as he scooped up to several of his high notes, and much older and more world-weary than is needed for the role.

As Senta, the daughter obsessed with the legend of the Dutchman and doomed to choose her own, dramatic death, soprano Melody Moore was pitch perfect. Vocally, she exhibited complete control over the vocal demands of the part. From her first on-stage appearance, she was engrossed in her character and is loaded with stage presence, stealing focus from every other performer on the stage. I had seen and enjoyed her tremendously in a pair of previous roles, both with New York City Opera. This was a defining part for her – big and challenging enough to showcase her all of her abundant singing and acting gifts. Brava to Ms Moore, whose performance must surely be one of the highlights of the 2013 festival season, if not the best single performance.

Kudos also to bass Peter Volpe as Senta's father Daland, who was chiefly responsible for providing warmth and comic relief and also to Young Artist Adam Bielamowicz, playing the role of the Steersman, whose spinto tenor reached the rafters.

In any Wagner opera, the orchestra might also be considered a performer, too. Under conductor John Keenan, the Festival Orchestra sounded gargantuan and never dragged like some who have played this opera do. Besides introducing the Dutchman's powerful leitmotif, the ten-minute overture launching the opera includes a tsunami of strings that wrap you in lush and lovely sound. At last evening's show, a number of audience members stood for Melody Moore's curtain call. However, when Keenan joined the company for a bow, most of the rest of the audience rushed to its feet in deserved acknowledgement of his and the orchestra's success.

This new production of *The Flying Dutchman* at Glimmerglass Festival might not be like many you've ever seen before. Thanks to the artistry of those aforementioned and also set designer James Noone, lighting designer Mark McCullough, and choreographer Eric Sean Fogel, it is very much worth seeing and hearing. There are seven more performances on selected dates through 24 August.