

The Hub Review

Double Dutchman

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Thomas Garvey



Ryan McKinny as the Dutchman. Photos: Karli Cadel.

The eponymous hero of Richard Wagner's *The Flying Dutchman* is supposed to make landfall only once in seven years - and here I've seen his apparition twice in a little over seven weeks! The spectral sea captain's first bow came courtesy of our own Boston Lyric Opera, which this spring gave us Wagner's original score in a cool, modernist production that alas, was burdened by some heavy Freudian baggage.

And now the Glimmerglass Festival has likewise taken up the work that made Wagner "Wagner," this time producing a gripping, almost glitzy version that strikingly complements the BLO staging. At Glimmerglass, we get Wagner's later revisions to the score (including his pivotal "redemption" coda); and BLO's modernist chill is replaced with a sleek and knowing theatrical savvy. Indeed, director Francesca Zambello's staging even borrows a bit from Broadway: she lays on the scrim and lighting effects, and there's even a dance number (!).

What's striking about the production, however, is how well its Trevor Nunn trappings serve the composer's intents; Ms. Zambello understands *The Flying Dutchman* to its core, but she also knows it was originally intended as popular entertainment. So while she's clearly edging Wagner's doomy vision toward the accessible thrills of summer stock, she has done so with one eye resolutely set on the work's ambiguous depths. And perhaps best of all, she has pulled together a powerhouse vocal cast to put this challenging opera over, one that - wonder of wonders - can actually *act*, too.

The result is a *Dutchman* for the the mass *and* the class audience; the summer crowds should thrill to the pecs of Ryan McKinny's shirtless spectre (above), but serious Wagnerites will find that Zambello has also attended sensitively to the vexing complexities of this impacted text, which is almost a cauldron roiling with the themes and obsessions the composer would slowly extrapolate over the rest of his career.

Even from the production's opening salvo, we sense that Zambello knows what she's doing; the curtain rises on the heroine, Senta (Melody Moore) tossing and turning in her boat-like bed, whose curtains are flapping like sails in a high wind - while all around her Wagner's baleful storm music calls to the elements, and actual ships rise and fall on unseen waves. It's a striking and layered stage image - one that conveys and compresses a veritable knot of Wagnerian ideas - and Zambello keeps the metaphors coming, from the way the Dutchman's ghostly crew (at top) resemble damned maidens (those who break their vow to the Dutchman wind up you-know-where) to the way the sailors' wives spend their "spinning song" braiding not thread but the rigging of their lovers' ships (below).



Wagner's "spinning" scene at Glimmerglass.

These moments are so resonant because at bottom, *The Flying Dutchman* is a meditation on romantic isolation at its most extreme - a notion that Zambello has clearly conveyed to her cast as well as her design team. Ryan McKinny's Dutchman in particular seemed to burn like a lonely lighthouse with pained internal conflict (just as he should). Vocally McKinny lost a bit of color at the low end of the role (he's really a bass-baritone, not a bass), but his upper range proved clarion, and his presence was riveting; I doubt I'll see a more compelling take on the part.



In contrast, soprano Melody Moore played Senta, the woman who breaks the curse on the Dutchman by giving up her life for him, as something of an emotional sphinx. If BLO made Senta a Freudian study in daddy issues, then Moore made her a woman frozen between two fateful romantic choices. Her instrument struck me as not, perhaps, highly individual, but there's a touch of smoky richness to its middle range, and Moore nailed her high notes with expert control even while throwing herself into the role with abandon; the famous duet between Senta and the Dutchman here crackled with a palpable erotic charge, which of course only ratcheted up the emotional suspense (it helped that tenor Jay Hunter Morris brought a contemptuous attack to his turn as Erik, the Dutchman's romantic competition; Morris couldn't believe his beloved's choice of suitor, and his disbelief clearly made Senta uncertain, too).

Together this trio made the evening something special, although there was fine vocal work to be found elsewhere in the cast. Bass Peter Volpe made a rather conventionally genial Daland (Senta's father) - with few if any hints of the manipulative distance that basically drove the BLO interpretation - but he acquitted himself well vocally, as did tenor Adam Bielamowicz, who brought a hint of lyrical sweetness (one of the few such touches in the opera) to the songs of the Steersman who dreams of the girl waiting for him on shore.

Melody Moore, hitting top notes even in the rigging.

Other musical results were a bit more mixed. The chorus sang with great vigor, but less discipline, and down in the pit, the horns were sometimes rather ragged, and conductor John Keenan at first seemed dedicated to articulating each of Wagner's motifs individually, which compromised the momentum of the score (things improved markedly in this regard in the second act, which surged just as it should).

I have to admit these caveats were more than balanced in my mind, though, by the production's exemplary design. Mark McCullough's evocative lighting, with its contrasting palettes of frigid blues and hellish reds, sometimes seemed almost a character unto itself, while James Noone's flexible set yielded one striking stage picture after another. And costumer Erik Teague's conception of the Dutchman - with a huge Mark-of-Cain tattoo emblazoned over his heart - was a masterstroke. All in all, this is a remarkable production that for Wagner fans (as well as those looking for a point of entry into this composer's forbidding canon) should prove well worth the drive out to Glimmerglass Lake.

For me, the production also served as an introduction to the Festival itself, and I couldn't have been more impressed. I already knew its setting was gorgeous - but I was surprised by the quality of the theatre itself; it may be one of the best in the Northeast, boasting strong acoustics, an electric connection with the stage, and (perhaps rarest) a palpable sense of the audience's own communal presence. The Festival also seems to get the tone of the whole experience just right: the program is rich in detail, and the introductory lecture was delightful (and included a little theory class for the uninitiated, with Wagner's chords analyzed before our eyes on a keyboard). The rest of the season boasts only a single obvious crowd-pleaser - *Camelot*, with barihunk Nathan Gunn; most of the rest of the productions struck me as risks (Zambello is even staging Pergolesi's *Stabat Mater*). But something tells me, judging just from *Dutchman*, that Zambello may be able to pull most of this off. She's a smart lady, and Glimmerglass is clearly a festival to watch.