

## Master and Commander

First let's salute scenic designer James Noone. If we're not going to inhabit Norwegian cliffs, we need something as eye-catching as the abstraction of ship and rigging that framed the stage. But then let's thank director Francesca Zambello for not staging the overture (not that I really think she'd have done so). With a simple blue wash playing over the curtain, the Glimmerglass Festival Orchestra launched into the iconic music with the very Wagner-experienced, Metropolitan Opera-credentialed John Keenan at the helm. The acoustics of the Alice Busch Theatre were made for such sounds.

*The Flying Dutchman* is considered to be Wagner's first successful realization of the type of music-drama that would evolve into the Ring and its later brethren. If bits of Verdi-esque scene-and-aria stuff intrude, it's a remnant from the approach Wagner was leaving behind. As an operatic experience, especially with as powerhouse a cast as was here assembled, this production was magnificent.

Glimmerglass typically combines credits-rich singers with performers from the festival's Young Artists program—something that's been going on for 25 years!—and from the start we saw the success. Bass Peter



McKinney in *The Flying Dutchman*,  
photo by Karli Cadell/Glimmerglass Festival

Volpe, who has Met Opera roles among his credits, sang the role of Daland, the ship's captain who unwittingly engages the titular Dutchman. He was effectively paired in the opening scene with tenor Adam Bielamowicz from the Young Artists program, a singer whom we saw in last summer's *Music Man*.

All of which raised the threshold for the Dutchman's entrance. Set against a criss-cross of rigging over which were draped a checkerboard of female silhouettes, bass-baritone Ryan McKinney took easy and quiet command of the stage. His characterization had the confidence that conveys despair. He was frightening, yet you longed to help him. His pursuit of the captain's daughter—the woman he hopes will save him from his otherwise endless torment—effectively mixed desperation with aggressiveness.

As the piece requires, these are unusually big voices, but they're a relief to the ears in this age of over-amplified everything.

We meet Senta, the daughter (soprano Melody Moore) as she and other shore-bound women spin fabrics, the musical resonance between spinning and sailing

effectively portrayed in the music. And in the scenic design and staging: the ropes upon which sailors depend become braids in the hands of their girlfriends and wives.

Despite her engagement to Erik, a hunter (tenor Jay Hunter Morris), Senta is obsessed with the legend of the Dutchman and treasures a portrait she hugs to excess. Moore's rich voice soars with longing as she relates the legend ("Traft ihr das Schiff im Meere an") to the others, a sequence that brings together not only many of the strands of musical texture but also strands of psychological motivation, resonating with the look of the set.

Simple staging allows the emotional turmoil to percolate through the second act until it reaches its height in the duet that begins "Wie aus der Ferne," as the Dutchman and Senta explore a love built on sorrow and dreams.

Mark McCullough's lighting wasn't shy about blood-red washes, effectively shading them at times with burning yellows that often isolated various characters and certainly reinforced any sense of uneasiness in the music.

Although Wagner's shift to through-composed scenes did away with many applause moments, the pacing is shrewdly realized. Following the duet (and the intermission Wagner abjured), a dancing-villagers scene lightens the mood. It's a calculated moment—soon they will address the darkened ship of the Dutchman (facing the audience, a wonderfully unsettling touch), and the emotional arc will wrench us to a bittersweet finish.

This is the second Glimmerglass production of a Wagner opera, following 2008's S&M-flavored romp through the very early *Das Liebesverbot*. Let's hope that the *Dutchman*'s deserved success inspires the Festival to head further into Bayreuth territory.

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