

The Washington Post

Under Zambello, Glimmerglass festival creating a new musical community

August 9

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(Karli Cadel/The Glimmerglass Festival/) - Jack Noseworthy as Mordred in The Glimmerglass Festival's 2013 production of Camelot.

Francesca Zambello heads two opera companies. One is the Washington National Opera; the other is the Glimmerglass Festival, the summer festival in Cooperstown, N.Y. (which this year runs through Aug. 24). Technically speaking, Glimmerglass is not solely an opera company; under Zambello, its purview has opened to embrace all forms of musical theater, including song recitals and an annual Broadway musical. But Zambello is putting the “company” into it with a vengeance.

There’s an trend among classical music institutions to find new ways to connect with their communities — or to create new ones. This is very much what’s going on at Glimmerglass. Zambello is creating a

group of artists with allegiances to the company, bringing in big names to serve as artists-in-residence every year (this year it's the husband-and-wife team of Nathan and Julie Gunn, the baritone and pianist) and inviting them back (Eric Owens, last year's artist-in residence, came through last weekend for a recital). She's focusing on the apprentice program and finding ways to expand it. She's maintaining a children's chorus every year to give young people a chance to experience opera firsthand.



(Claire McAdams/Glimmerglass Opera/Claire McAdams Photography) - Francesca Zambello, the new Artistic Advisor of the Washington National Opera

A festival, according to this template, is a place where artists gather, experiment with different kinds of performances, and learn from and train each other and the audience. This is the “company” aspect of Zambello’s work, and some of these precepts — and some of these artists — will be making their way to the Washington National Opera in future seasons. (Three of the young artists from Glimmerglass will join the Domingo-Cafritz program at WNO next year; one Domingo-Cafritz alumna is a Glimmerglass young artist this summer.)

Accompanying these laudable goals is a streak of pragmatism — necessary, perhaps, to be able to afford to get all this on stage.

One example: putting on a Broadway show means you need some singers who can dance, so you add singing dancers to your apprentice program and then find other things for them to do. The eight-member dance ensemble can be seen this summer in Lerner and Loewe’s “Camelot,” but they also enliven the last act of Wagner’s “The Flying Dutchman” and get a performance of their own making genteel, anodyne contemporary-choreography moves in a staging of Pergolesi’s “Stabat Mater.”

Another example: Finding a way to showcase a children’s chorus means creating a mash-up of two versions of David Lang’s Pulitzer Prize-winning “The Little Match Girl Passion,” a Bach-like setting of the Hans Christian

Andersen tale. The piece was originally written for a vocal quartet; Lang subsequently created a choral version, and Zambello has interleaved the two (with Lang’s blessing) so that the narrative segments are sung by the original spare quartet and the children’s chorus takes over for the sections of apostrophizing. To make sure the kids get their due, Zambello commissioned Lang to write a short choral piece for them alone; “When we were children” is written in Lang’s post-“Little Match Girl” style, taking a range of translations of the Bible text that runs “When I was a child, I spake as a child” in the King James Version and setting them with clear straightforwardness, the small sober voices sounding old before their time.

A pragmatic intermission

The ultimate and perhaps most shocking example of pragmatism at this year’s festival is the intermission of “The Flying Dutchman,” which Zambello inserted at a point approximately midway in the story and smack in the middle of the drama. It represents a solution to the practical problem of how to put one intermission into a work which is generally performed either in three-act or one-act versions, and how to avoid running into orchestral overtime (which kicks in, at Glimmerglass, after 90 minutes of playing). But at this point, pragmatism begins to interfere with drama.

And here, perhaps, is a weak link in a generally likeable and well-meaning festival. Each of the summer's four shows — I saw three of them last weekend — serves a purpose within the context of the festival as a whole (including feting the year's two bicentenarians, Wagner with "Dutchman" and Verdi with the early comedy "King for a Day"). And there was some fine singing, from Anthony Roth Costanzo's round, warm countertenor in the "Stabat Mater" to David Pittsinger's utterly committed performance as King Arthur in "Camelot." But the community emphasis made the whole thing seem slightly minor-league. The festival as a whole is lovely, but it lacks a breakout hit — something to draw people who aren't yet part of the increasingly cozy Glimmerglass club.

That hit wasn't "Camelot," admirably though this show was cast. Glimmerglass brought out its big guns with Pittsinger, baritone Gunn, and the young soprano Andriana Chuchman, who sang as beautifully here as she did in WNO's "Show Boat" a few months ago. "Camelot" was certainly light-years better than "Annie Get Your Gun" in 2011, the first musical of Zambello's Glimmerglass tenure; one reason was that Pittsinger and Chuchman seemed less opera singers singing Broadway than simply artists giving wholehearted performances. Oddly it was Gunn, who has had no problem dipping an occasional limb into the Broadway repertoire in the past, who sounded more as if he were slumming. He was, of course, since "Camelot," though studded with lovely songs and of some historical interest, is not a very good musical. And wonderful as it is to hear such works played with a full orchestra (zippily conducted by James Lowe) and sung without amplification (perfectly audibly and understandably), a small opera festival taking on this repertoire tends to come up with something less like full-bore Broadway than like summer stock.

And that hit wasn't "Passions," the title given to the Pergolesi-Lang double bill, although it was a pleasantly touching evening. The music of the Pergolesi sounded lovely with Speranza Scappucci's lissome conducting (Nadine Sierra was the soprano, now warm, now slightly shrill); the Lang was well-served, mash-up or no, by four of the apprentice artists and the children's chorus; and the whole was conceived as a tribute to women's suffering. It became suffering-lite in this highly aestheticized presentation, the work of two different directors. Jessica Lang, the acclaimed choreographer, offered the Pergolesi in the idiom of Martha Graham, while Zambello staged David Lang's piece as a veritable Dickensian Christmas pageant with lovable Victorian urchins and a big glowing tree. The whole idea of turning the Andersen tale into a Bach cantata has always seemed to me to have an undercurrent either of wry humor or of kitsch; by taking it at face value, as everyone seems to, the kitsch tends to predominate, despite the spare beauty of Lang's setting.

"Dutchman" was the festival's biggest opera and in ways the most disappointing, starting with an orchestra (earnestly conducted by John Keenan) that sounded a couple of sizes too small for this work.

Serviceable 'Dutchman'

The singing represented the international standard of Wagner singing today, which is to say that two of the voices were a little light for their parts — Ryan McKinny as a hipster Dutchman and Melody Moore as a schoolgirl Senta — and the third was big enough, but all over the map. Jay Hunter Morris has been singing Siegfried at the Met, and for part of the role of Erik it sounded as if he'd blown out his voice past any hope of singing legato, or even on pitch; then he would turn around and sing a line or two that was so powerful and thrilling you wanted to scream for more. He was both the best and worst thing on stage, which by the end of the performance made me eager to hear him again.

Zambello's production, new for this festival, offered a thicket of ropes from the flies, now as shipboard accoutrements, now representing the forest of Senta's neurotic obsession, now delivering the coup de grace as Senta, rather than leaping into the water at the end of the opera, garottes herself in her bed. All of it added up to an evening that was completely serviceable; it got the job done. You could say it represented the best company manners — overlooking, of course, the downright rudeness of that intermission.



(Karli Cadel/The Glimmerglass Festival) - Ensemble member Andrea Beasom in The Glimmerglass Festival's production of Pergolesi's Stabat Mater.



(Karli Cadel/The Glimmerglass Festival) - Victoria Munro in The Glimmerglass Festival's 2013 production of David Lang's the little match girl passion.



(Karli Cadel/The Glimmerglass Festival) - David Pittsinger as King Arthur and Andriana Chuchman as Guenevere in The Glimmerglass Festival's 2013 production of Camelot.



(Karli Cadel/The Glimmerglass Festival) - Melody Moore as Senta and Jay Hunter Morris as Erik in The Glimmerglass Festival's 2013 production of Wagner's The Flying Dutchman.