
Opera Warhorses

An appreciation and analysis of the ‘Standard Repertory’ of opera

Eric Owens is Vocally Powerful, Dramatic and Emotional in Kurt Weill’s “Lost in the Stars” – Glimmerglass Festival, July 22, 2012

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A feature of Francesca Zambello’s stewardship of New York’s Glimmerglass Festival, which began in 2011, is her Artist-in-Residence program. The opera singer so designated for 2012 is bass-baritone Eric Owens, who opened the season in the role of Amonasro in a new Zambello production of Verdi’s “Aida”.

Although he was a memorable presence in Zambello’s reconceptualization of Verdi’s classic opera, it was Owens’ lead role as Stephen Kumalo in a co-production (with the Cape Town Opera) of Kurt Weill’s “Lost in the Stars” that will likely evoke the longest memories of the 2012 Festival.

[Below: Eric Owens as the South African Anglican priest Stephen Kumalo; edited image, based on a William M. Brown photograph, courtesy of the Glimmerglass Festival.]



The Story of “Lost in the Stars”

The 1949 musical “Lost in the Stars”, by the team of German composer Kurt Weill and American lyricist Maxwell Anderson, is inspired by Alan Paton’s popular 1948 literary work, *Cry the Beloved Country* about the black African Stephen Kumalo, a dirt poor Anglican preacher in an environmentally degraded rural area some distance from the South African City of Johannesburg. A disturbing letter from John Kumalo, his brother, about their sister, causes Stephen to make his first trip ever to the city, in search, not only of his sister, but of his son, Absalom, of whom he has had no word for a year. He discovers his son had gotten his girl friend pregnant, and had been coaxed into participating in a failed robbery in which he had accidentally killed a white man.

At his trial, Absalom, whose father had always taught him to tell the truth, refused to plead “not guilty”, for which he was executed. This resulted in Stephen’s crisis of faith and resignation from his ministry, but the efforts of the white father of the slain man in promoting reconciliation restored Stephen’s trust in the fundamental goodness of men.

Weill in Opera and Theater

Weill’s musical works for the theater – in collaboration with German lyricist Bertold Brecht (“The Rise and Fall of the City of Mahagonny”, “The Threepenny Opera”) and with American lyricist Maxwell Anderson (“Knickerbocker Holiday”, “Lost in the Stars”) – are only a portion of Weill’s output during his 50 years of life. Even so, the works mentioned, bristle as they do with radical social commentary, have yielded some of the standards in the “American Song-book”, including the megahits *Mack the Knife* (from “Threepenny Opera”) and *September Song* (from “Knickerbocker Holiday”).

Because Weill chose to write for musical theater as opposed to the opera house, his works’ appearances in opera company performance histories is quite spotty. For this co-production with the Cape Town Opera to take one of the four spots in the Glimmerglass Festival was a huge commitment to Weill and to this work on Zambello’s part. That commitment has paid off handsomely.

The production, by American director Tazewell Thompson with sets and costumes by Michael Mitchell, was beautifully conceived, brilliant in its theatrical effects, integrating dance and physicality intelligently; and, without ever being maudlin, is so affecting in its emotional content that not only was the audience at the performance’s end in tears, so were the cast members.

Sean Panikkar’s Leader

Second only to Eric Owens’ Stephen Kumalo is the role of the Leader, who narrates the story and acts as a kind of Greek chorus while engaging from time to time in the action – a theatrical device used later by composer Andrew Lloyd Webber and lyricist Tim Rice through the creation of the role of Che for their musical “Evita”.

Cast as the Leader is the Pennsylvanian lyric tenor Sean Panikkar, in one of his most effective roles to date. The growth in the size of his voice has been noted in several recent reviews [See, for example, **Strassberger’s Verdi-Year “Nabucco” – Leo An, Csilla Boross Are Magnificent in Inventive Production – Washington National Opera, May 15, 2012** and **Loving “The Last Savage”: Over the Top Menotti Charms at Santa Fe Opera – August 5, 2011.**]

This tall, handsome lyric tenor, whose voice now borders on the weight of a *spinto*, surely sent shivers through the audience when, at the performance's *sdenouement*, he intoned the anthem *Cry, the Beloved Country*.

[Below: Sean Panikkar is the Leader; edited image, based on a Karli Cadel photograph, courtesy of the Glimmerglass Opera Festival.]



Amos Nomnabo's John Kumalo, Makudopanyane Senaone's Absalom Kumalo and the Cape Town Opera

South African baritone Amos Nomnabo, a 2012 Glimmerglass Young Artist, sang the role of Stephen's brother, John Kumalo, a successful businessman and labor organizer in Johannesburg. Nomnabo had the fortune of performing a role for which a Weill-Anderson song, *Little Tin God* - cut from the original production – was restored in the current revival.

Nomnabo dispatched the song, which likely is unfamiliar to most of the audience, with skill.

[Below: John Kumalo (Amos Nomnabo, center, in white shirt and tie) explains why the workers need to be organized; edited image, based on a Karli Cadel photograph, courtesy of the Glimmerglass Festival.]



Playing Absalom Kumalo, John Kumalo's nephew, was Makudopanyane Senaone, another of the three South African artists selected for the Young Artists' program.

Senaone presented an intensely sympathetic portrayal of a young man, who against his instincts and judgment, was persuaded by his peers to engage in a criminal act with fatal consequences.

[Below: the prisoner Absalom Kumalo (Makudopanyane Senaone, right), condemned to die, is married by his father, Stephen Kumalo (Eric Owens, center) to Irina (Brandy Lynn Hawkins, left) who is expecting Absalom's child; edited image, based on a Karli Cadel photograph, courtesy of the Glimmerglass Opera Festival.]



Although the then existing racially-based laws and attitudes of the South African judicial system do not past the minimum expectations of modern justice, Absalom himself made the decision to plead guilty to a capital crime, because he had been raised always to tell the truth, rather than use the legal loopholes of which his peers availed themselves. Absalom's honesty results in the crisis of faith of the Reverend Kumalo, which is a centerpiece of the drama.

A second restoration of a song cut from Weill and Anderson's original Broadway production, entitled *Gold*, was sung and danced by the choral and dance ensembles that integrated artistic personnel from both the Cape Town Opera and the Glimmerglass Festival.

[Below: the ensemble of "Lost in the Stars"; edited image, based on a Karli Cadel photograph, courtesy of the Glimmerglass Opera Festival.]



Although the principal themes of “Lost in the Stars” are serious, there are light-hearted moments. One of the most engaging is the ballad *Big Mole*, sung brilliantly by Caleb McLaughlin, who received an audience ovation for his efforts.

[Below: Caleb McLaughlin is Alex, who sings the show-stopper, *Big Mole*; edited image, based on a Karli Cadel photograph, courtesy of the Glimmerglass Opera Festival.]



The rest of the cast, without exception, gave solid performances. Another young artist from South Africa was Bongwe Nakani as the Answerer. North American Young Artists included Ryan McConnell as Arthur Jarvis, the white anti-Apartheid activist (who ironically was the person unintentionally killed by Absalom), Brandy Lynn Hawkins as Absalom’s pregnant bride, and Chrystal E. Williams as Linda.

Appearing in the major non-singing roles were Wynn Harmon as Edward Jarvis, Arthur’s racist father, and Jake Gardner as a Judge who obviously understood the defects in the existing judicial system, but felt he had to follow the law.

Eric Owens' Stephen Kumalo

Towering above all of these excellent performances, however, was the singular achievement of Eric Owens as Stephen Kumalo.

The final scene, in which Wynn Harmon's Edward Jarvis, makes the move towards racial reconciliation and persuades Eric Owens' Reverend Kumalo not to resign his ministry – even to cross the existing racial barriers to enroll himself and his family into Kumalo's church – is as moving as any theatrical scene one is likely to experience.

[Below: Edward Jarvis (Wynn Harmon, above, front row) consoles Stephen Kumalo (Eric Owens); edited image, based on a Karli Cader photograph, courtesy of the Glimmerglass Opera Festival.]



At curtain calls, Owens was obviously emotionally shaken, and it was reported to me that members of the cast were openly sobbing onstage.

John DeMain conducted with the authority that this eminent interpreter of both operatic and Broadway music brings to everything he assays.

This was a great theatrical experience, that I recommend to all unreservedly.