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The Flying Dutchman at Glimmerglass Festival 2013

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A season programmed under an umbrella theme can feel a strain, but Artistic and General Director Francesca Zambello has pulled off a clean sweep of wins at Glimmerglass Festival this year, all under a banner featuring Romanticism. Glimmerglass Lake itself provides a most suitable setting that reflects nature as inspiration, and the shows bring to vivid life two other motifs of a movement that spanned two continents and several decades: idealism and the individualistic imagination.

Such themes might be attributed to qualities held by its strong, dynamic leader. Zambello has charged ahead, bringing together genres, musical styles, and even periods outside an academic understanding of "the Romantic Era." She lets the works speak to each other, forming a dialogue on Romanticism nonetheless. She has pulled in the surrounding community, being instrumental in creating additional programming, including an exhibit at the Fenimore Art Museum down the road from the Glimmerglass Festival on Romantic Landscapes by the Hudson Valley Painters and, at historic Hyde Hall, evenings of poetry and other writings by 19th century writers including Emily Dickinson, Thoreau and Emerson.

Zambello herself directs the great romantic opera, *The Flying Dutchman* by Richard Wagner. It's a "must see" opera. It's got those lush stirring musical passages borrowed by many and heard in other popular works. It's a story of pirates, ghost ships and the walking dead, and, at its center, of redemptive love that reaches beyond the grave.

The director has thrown out the need for great heavy sets and watery realism often associated with this opera. This production mostly takes place on one ship reduced to a single gunwale in silhouette and rattlings that reach up the full height of the back cyc. ("Why two ships if one will do?" Zambello quipped at an after show "talkback" to a patron who wanted to know why she'd downsized the opera to a single vessel.)

What Zambello hasn't compromised on is the role of the music. John Keenan conducts the unusually large orchestra for Glimmerglass (forty-nine pieces in all.) The musicians muster their forces to produce a pretty sensational sound and carry the audience with them through the fast string work and dark percussion into experiencing the swells and roiling of a tempestuous sea.



Ryan McKinny as the Dutchman (Photo: Karli Cadel/The Glimmerglass Festival)

There are still plenty of dramatic values in the visualizations for the show. Designer James Noone has heavily explored the use of ropes as essential sea-worthy set props but also as symbolic representations. We first see sailors clambering up the ropes as if to trim the sails. Later, these figures seem to be creatures more dead than alive, trapped and dangling like insects caught in a spider's web. The pictures they form serve as foreshadowing and backstory of the women's fates who could not keep faith with their promise to the Dutchmen. In another scene, a forest of rope "serpents" feature in a young girl's Freudian nightmare.



The Glimmerglass Festival 2013 production of Wagner's The Flying Dutchman. (Photo: Jamie Kraus/ The Glimmerglass Festival)

Mark McCullough creates some stunning lighting effects. His use of darkness, light and shadow is thrown into sharp contrast when he introduces the blood red on the cyc that captures so well the hellish fate of the damned Dutchman and his grizzly crew.

Making the setting minimal affords the piece a kind of mysterious power that keep the work changing and its meaning ambivalent. The production suggests that perhaps the whole narration takes place as a dream of a young impressionable girl, for Senta is seen in her bedroom both at the beginning and the end of the opera, creating a kind of circularity in the narration.

The production choices bring focus to the complex psychology of the individual characters. Melody Moore is Senta, the young girl who dreams of the Dutchman and his lonely fate. She is a singer in absolute top form to tackle this difficult role. The demands of the Wagnerian musical lines never keep her from exploring the dramatic nuances and drives that compel her character. One moment she is lost in a girlish fantasy about an outlier. Later, she seems diffident then emboldened by her father's pushing her to marry the stranger he brings home. She manages to convey both strangled obsession and spiritual compassion, in a tragic journey driven by a mysterious imaginative vision.

There is a telling directorial moment when Senta has pushed her meddling father out of the room, and she and the Dutchman are finally alone. He sits downstage brooding, staring hauntingly out into the auditorium. She too sits but staring not directly at the man she has longed for but rather at his portrait, as if wanting to linger in her fantasy rather than face a reality of any making.

Zambello makes us question what "normal" reality is in this society of Wagner's fierce imaginings. In the famous "Spinning Song", regimented factory girls grow increasingly agitated and begin to physically twitch as if they might all succumb to madness under the society's overly-strict expectations of feminine compliance. The scene lends another dimension to better understand Senta's suffering and her urgent need to escape at whatever cost.



Jay Hunter Morris as Erik and Melody Moore as Senta (Photo: Karli Cadel/The Glimmerglass Festival)

At one point, Senta is confronted by Eric, her old boyfriend and protector. In many productions the role offers a pale homegrown substitute to the dangerously exciting stranger. Jay Hunter Morris commands the best operatic stages vocally and physically and, as Eric, he presents a strong

viable and certainly healthier alternative to the wraithlike Dutchman. His love has Moore's Senta weakening in her resolve, leaning back into the arms of a man who offers her support and conjugal happiness. It's at moments like these, with such superb casting, that the dramatic tension really cooks.

Peter Volpe also offers an original, multi-dimensional figure as Daland. At first he is introduced as an imposing stern captain; later he offers some comic relief as he gets downright goofy in his greed for gold. The quirky father later personifies a kind of Freudian weirdness. All this works to keep the audience guessing as he plays the show moment to moment, all the while booming bass notes that pound through one's ribs.

**Highly Recommended
The Flying Dutchman**

Closes August 24, 2013
Glimmerglass Festival 2013
7300 State Highway 80
Cooperstown, NY 13326
2 hours, 20 minutes with 1
intermission

Tickets: \$10 – \$117

[Details and Tickets](#)

To my mind the casting of Ryan McKinney as the Dutchman was just about perfection. The performer exudes a brooding intensity in a coiled dangerous stage persona. Erik Teague designed a costume with high-waisted black trousers and full-length "pirate coat," and the get-up leaves McKinney a bare chest bare with a tattoo display that makes him seem all the more a convincing outsider and sex symbol.

Nothing seems to come easy to this character, perhaps especially pushing himself onto the young woman whom he needs so badly to love him in order to escape his damned destiny. Even the way the singer produces his gorgeous deep

sound, seemingly to be pulled up through a torturous process from his bellows-like musculature, seems to add greatly to the role. The Dutchman's suffering and his being willing to endure his situation is compelling and finally works his transformation from a transgressed pirate to a romantic hero, noble in his lonely defiance.

McKinney is best when he remains physically alone. Somehow, when the two caught in this fatal attraction actually connect physically, the vampirish grappling of Dutchman and Senta seem to let the exciting tension actually disperse.

The amazing thing about Glimmerglass productions is that they continue to be tweaked and shaped. What a marvelous luxury for singers, directors, and the works themselves! So perhaps this layer of the story will be advanced in a next layer of problem-solving.