

# Left Bank Art Blog



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## Magic

By Charles Kessler

Readers of this blog know I hardly ever write about dance, even though I love it and go to at least one or two dance concerts every month; and I've never written about opera. But Norte Maar's dance concert [CounterPointe3](#) and [LoftOpera's](#) production of *Lucrezia Borgia* have inspired me to stretch a bit.



Standing Ovation for LoftOpera's *Lucrezia Borgia*.

LoftOpera is a small company – small for an opera company, that is. Their recent production of Donizetti's *Lucrezia Borgia* had 20 performers including 6 in the chorus, a 24-member orchestra, and 16 people listed in the program under production, but I'm sure there were a lot more people involved that weren't credited. And tickets were only \$30 to \$50 (vs. \$160 average for the Met).

The company is young and enthusiastic, and it plays to a mostly young and enthusiastic audience. They have been staging full operas in various temporary spaces in Brooklyn for a couple of years now. (I saw their *Barber of Saville* last year.) And they're great! They've gotten raves in the *Times* and other places and have become so popular that all their productions not only immediately sell out, but people are actually scalping their tickets.

A great deal of their popularity, aside from the first-rate music, is due to their casual, unpretentious and intimate presentations and settings — and that's probably why they appeal to a young audience. The spaces are large lofts that seat 200-300 people, usually in the round, so everyone is close to the singers.



Nikhil Navkal as Gennaro and Joanna Parisi as Lucrezia Borgia.

The singers moved in and out of the the audience. One time, had I not ducked, I would have been hit in the head by a large table when they moved it. (We were warned in

advance.) And talk about casual – beer is served before and during the performance, and every once in a while you can hear a bottle roll on the floor.

At this performance the audience was so exhilarated that at intermission they got up and excitedly talked to each other and the performers. I struck up a conversation with Cody Rowlands, one of the trumpet players, who told me that he thought the experience of this production was probably more like it was in Donizetti's time. He has a point. Donizetti operas played in large, opulent opera houses like the Met, but unlike the staid, hushed opera audience of today, his audience was raucous, loudly cheering and jeering the singers. While the LoftOpera audience didn't interrupt the performance, I imagine we had a sense of engagement similar to what the 19th-century audience experienced because of the intimate and casual setting of this production.

One little thing that I think exemplifies why it was so great: the hanging globes were occasionally lowered, and the singers every once in a while got smacked in the head by one, but that didn't phase them – nothing did. They were so focused, so intense and so all-out in their singing that you couldn't help being taken along for the emotional ride.



Lucrezia Borgia (Joanne Parisi) pleading with her fourth husband, the evil Duke of Ferrara (Matthew Anchel) to save Gennaro (Nikhil Nevkal), who, unbeknownst to the Duke, is secretly her son.

*Lucrezia Borgia* is a ridiculous melodrama with a particularly farfetched ending: Gennaro, who is poisoned (for the second time – don't ask), tries to stab Lucrezia because she caused him and his friends to be poisoned, but she stops him by revealing (spoiler

alert) that she is his mother (gasp!). Lucrezia begs Gennaro to take the antidote (again) but he refuses, preferring to die with his friends.



The prologue to LoftOpera's *Lucrezia Borgia* – Joanne Parisi as Lucrezia recognizing her long-lost son. But as ridiculous and unbelievable as the final scene is, Joanna Parisi, who starred as Lucrezia, sang it with such a frenzied passion that it brought some of us to tears. The closing aria is the famous and very demanding "Era desso il figlio mio." Donizetti's star soprano insisted he write it for her in order to showcase her vocal agility. (Donizetti later

removed it because he thought it made the ending unbelievable, as if that would make a difference.) Parisi was awesome (and I mean that literally). She put her all into it and sang with such bravura, it brought the audience to their feet.

And that's another thing about opera in general, but especially as experienced in a small, closeup environment like this: the sound coming out of the singers is uncanny — so powerful, and preternaturally beautiful it seems superhuman. I mean, real human beings aren't supposed to sound like that. It's magical.

### CounterPointe3



*Intermezzo*, choreography by Julia K Gleich. Dancers: Izabela Szylińska, Łukasz Zięba, Ahmaud Culver. (Photo courtesy Gleich Dances and Norte Maar.)

CounterPointe3 is the third annual series of dances choreographed by women for women en pointe – i.e., ballet. Women invented modern dance – Isadora Duncan and Martha Graham in the United States and Mary Wigman in Germany, to name some of the main creators; and women still predominate in the field. Sadly, it's not so with ballet. It's not

surprising, then, that most of the choreographers for CounterPointe3 had more experience with modern dance than ballet. As a happy result, the dances integrated the power, angularity, weight and expressiveness of modern dance with the weightless grace of traditional ballet.

The dancer and choreographer Kayla Harley in her dance *run-on sentences of I miss you ...* is a case in point (sorry). She doesn't have the typical willowy body of a ballerina, but her compact energy, speed, precision and ability to quickly snap into odd angular positions and hold them rock steady, brought to ballet the type of expression found more often in modern dance.



*run-on sentences of I miss you ...* (work in progress), choreographed and danced by Kayla Harley.

*Quill/t* by Julia K. Gleich, one of the organizers of CounterPointe3, incorporated a mesmerizing video projection by David Chang, showing the hand of a calligrapher writing the word "quill/t" multiple times; and the amplified sound of the pen on the paper

contributed to the score. *Quill/t* was a complicated dance with intricate patterns of movement that were clarified and pulled together by apt arrangements of arms and legs. My favorite move (and Kayla Harley was superlative at it) is when the dancers would quickly snap into a 90 degree bent-over position, with their backs arched and their elbows akimbo – not a move one would ordinarily see in a traditional ballet. This was a riveting dance that required, and rewarded, my full concentration.



*Quill/t* choreographed by Julia Gleich and Lynn Parkerson with music by Ranjit Bhatnagar and video projection by David Chang. The dancers are Kayla Harley, Savannah Lee, Miku Kawamura and Christine Sawyer.

Once again, a magical experience. Real people (okay, they're in better shape than normal) become weightless, fly, and move more quickly and with more grace than mere mortals. And they get into positions and postures that human beings just can't do. These are just some of the reasons I'm so awed by dance, and why I love it so much.

**Jersey City dance news:** this year Julia Gleich will be one of the curators for the fifth annual *Your Move* dance festival; and *Nimbus Dance Works* will be appearing at BAM on May 8 - 9. I saw a rehearsal, and it is terrific.