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‘The Shining’ and ‘The Scarlet Letter’ Reviews

Operas based on famous books or movies have to offer a new insight into a familiar story.



Brian Mulligan, Kelly Kaduce and Alejandro Vega in ‘The Shining.’ PHOTO: KEN HOWARD

By **HEIDI WALESON**

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St. Paul, Minn.

Basing an opera on a famous movie or book may boost familiarity and bring in

audiences, but it also raises the stakes—what new insights does an operatic treatment bring to the project? “The Shining,” by Paul Moravec and Mark Campbell, a well-made, entertaining piece that had its world premiere at the Minnesota Opera recently, passes the test: It zeroes in on the struggle of Jack Torrance, and elevates the tale from a horror story to a human drama.

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Campbell’s carefully constructed libretto is closer to the 1977 Stephen King novel than to Stanley Kubrick’s 1980 film version, which was dominated by Jack Nicholson’s dementedly evil portrayal of Jack Torrance. Here, Jack sees his job as winter caretaker of the grand Overlook Hotel in the remote Colorado Rockies as a way to escape his demons—alcohol, domestic violence, professional failure—and provide for his wife, Wendy, and son, Danny. Of course, the opposite occurs; the ghosts that haunt the hotel find him. But his descent into demonic possession proceeds by fits and starts, as he tries to resist the example of his own abusive father, and when he finally allows the faulty boiler to blow up the hotel and destroy its evil, it is an act of liberation as well as suicide.

Mr. Moravec’s witty, evocative music strikes a good balance between the sincere and the creepy. Act I, though slowed by too much exposition, gives Jack and Wendy some heartfelt arias and duets that express their bond, while groans from the orchestra and glassy violins suggest the evil that threatens them. At first, the ghosts are just implied, but from the riotous Act I finale on, they are corporeal. In Act II, the music fragments and disintegrates, and piles on the sardonic darkness with some Kurt Weill-tinged party scenes, as Jack goes over the edge.

Brian Mulligan’s powerful baritone and imposing stage presence brought Jack’s character and struggle vividly to life. With her big dramatic soprano, Kelly Kaduce made Wendy’s fight for her family credible. Alejandro Vega was engaging in the mostly spoken role of Danny (ingeniously, his visions of the evil threatening the family were voiced by a gravelly offstage chorus). David Walton and John Robert Lindsey were potently nasty as Grady and Lloyd, two of the ghosts who tempt Jack with power and booze. And bass

Arthur Woodley brought *gravitas* to the role of Dick Hallorann, the cook who shares Danny's ESP gift and helps rescue him and his mother. Michael Christie was the capable conductor.

Minnesota spent some real money on the production: Erhard Rom's detailed set cleverly created not only the Overlook's grandeur and emptiness, but intimacy with smaller rooms that slid on and offstage. Robert Wierzel's eerie lighting and spectacular projections by 59 Productions—an alpine landscape, a snowstorm, the explosion, and even the patterned wallpaper that scrolled menacingly across the scrim during the orchestral interludes—heightened the tension. Kärin Kopischke's spot-on costumes featured 1970s-era classics like Jack's lumberjack shirt and Wendy's maxiskirt, as well as the elaborate getups of the ghosts' decadent 1945 costume ball that never ends. Director Eric Simonson kept the pacing swift and scary without skimping on the emotional resonance.

Denver

Nathaniel Hawthorne's "The Scarlet Letter," which has bedeviled generations of high-school students, has the kernel of an operatic plot: Secret lovers, trapped in a rigid Puritan community, are tormented by a malevolent enemy. But in Lori Laitman's relentlessly tuneful setting, which had its world premiere at Opera Colorado, the darkness of the story goes unplumbed. The tale is there, efficiently distilled into six scenes by the poet David Mason. But his verse libretto is both constraining and occasionally jarring ("scrimp / imp"; "myself / dear elf"), and the too-pretty music rarely breaks out of this rhythmic straitjacket.

Ms. Laitman wrote most freely for Arthur Dimmesdale, the community's minister and unacknowledged father of Hester Prynne's illegitimate child. The articulate tenor Dominic Armstrong captured his increasing guilt and torment with wide-eyed bewilderment and his public confession was the opera's one moment of real connection. With her high, slender soprano, Laura Claycomb's Hester was a secondary figure, never budging from her stoic acceptance of her fate. As Roger Chillingworth, Hester's husband and her lover's nemesis, baritone Malcolm MacKenzie was severely limited by the vocal writing, which was plodding and repetitive rather than poisonous. The repressive community also seemed under-characterized ("Repent, the world was born in sin" sounded positively sunny); the witchy Mistress Hibbons (mezzo Margaret Gawrysiak) gave voice to Dimmesdale's secret guilt in waltz time, supplying some welcome rhythmic variety. As with the voices, Ms. Laitman favored cheerful colors and lush timbres in the

orchestra, which was ably led by Ari Pelto.

Erhard Rom's simple set design (two movable wood walls, some straight-backed chairs), Terese Wadden's period costumes, and Robert Wierzel and Amith Chandrashaker's lighting were all more gloomily severe than the music; Topher Blair's projections added some color (green) for the forest scene. Beth Greenberg's solid direction stressed the mythic aspects of this morality tale.

Ms. Waleson writes about opera for the Journal.

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