

Back in 1999, the chief art critic of the *New York Times* called Barney ‘the most important American artist of his generation’. His partner or ex-partner (it’s not really clear, but they have a daughter) is Björk, the Icelandic art-rock diva. Barney makes sculpture but his main work now is in film, the best-known examples of which make up his *Cremaster* series, five feature-length films completed in 2002, also in collaboration with Bepler. He and Björk also starred in his *Drawing Restraint 9*, in which at the end they hacked off each other’s limbs and swam away to sea as whales.

The new film is based on Norman Mailer’s *Ancient Evenings*, a novel set in Ancient Egypt which involves attempted reincarnation through the river—fundament here refers to faeces. There are recurrent scenes of a wake for Mailer, set in a reconstruction of his Brooklyn apartment (the author, who died in 2007, appeared in one of the *Cremaster* episodes as Houdini). The wake is peopled by all sorts of Manhattan celebrities (Salman Rushdie, Elaine Stritch, Dick Cavett, the boxer Larry Holmes et al.). There are movie stars playing various Egyptian roles, including Paul Giamatti, Maggie Gyllenhaal and Ellen Burstyn. Singers include the bass-baritone twins Eugene and Herbert Perry as Set and the countertenor Brennan Hall as Horus. Barney, male-model handsome (he was one once), is Osiris, with Aimee Mullins, a double-amputee Paralympian record-holder and another model, as Isis. There are snakes and rotting meat (to be reincarnated you have to crawl inside a dead cow) and maggots and goo and hardcore sex.

What does it all mean? Barney is a visionary surrealist whose work strikes some (like the *New York Times* critic) as monumentally important and others as boring or silly or pretentious or all three. I incline toward the positive, but six hours is a long time. Bepler’s soundtrack is earnest and intense and even operatic, if not all that memorable. But some of the images stick stubbornly in the mind. Those drawn to the spectacles favoured by the Manchester Festival should love it.

JOHN ROCKWELL

## New York

OPERAMISSIION is the name of the seat-of-the-pants company founded by the conductor and harpsichordist Jennifer Peterson, and its mission is noble: to present all of Handel’s surviving stage works, complete and in chronological order. This year brought a brightly enjoyable *Agrippina*, straightforwardly staged (by Jeff Caldwell) in the elegant, wood-panelled library of Manhattan’s FABBRI MANSION, with no sets but in fine Baroque costumes by Charles Caine. Peterson led her forces with secure understanding of style, though sometimes her pauses seemed arbitrary, and the beginnings of recitatives could be smudged. Oboes, recorder and theorbo shone, alongside the concertmaster Daniel S. Lee, but the string section as a whole varied greatly—sometimes crisp, sometimes at sea. The natural trumpets demonstrated—as they will do—how hard the instrument is to master. Unlike *Rodrigo*, which the company staged last year, *Agrippina* is not an unknown quantity to stateside Handelians. Textual completeness is one thing that Peterson’s version added to previous stagings: to an audience seated on folding chairs this was rather a test, but it was nonetheless a revelation to hear this formally varied and interesting piece complete, stuffed as it is with melodic material recycled from Handel’s Italian cantatas.

An amusing, hard-working if not notably regal *Agrippina*, Karen Driscoll showed some Baroque style but was undermined by persistent mid-range flatness (January 18). The mezzo playing Nerone looked good but, despite an ‘interesting’ timbre, wasn’t up to her part. The two fully realized Handelian creations were Marcy Richardson’s adorable, Jean

Harlow-like Poppea and José Lemos's simply enacted but increasingly moving Ottone; both sang with memorable beauty of tone, fine breath control and apt decoration. Sarah Nelson Craft's imposing mezzo scored in Giunone's lone aria. Paul Goodwin-Groen's Claudio, properly droll and supercilious, nimbly fielded a grainy bass. Jorell Williams (Pallante) and Joseph Hill (Narciso) made amusingly contrasted yes-men. One wishes Peterson well—and one wishes her a rich benefactor to buy her plucky group more rehearsal time. Next year she promises *Rinaldo*, no mean feat to present complete. I'd sign up Richardson and Lemos for Armida and Eustazio right away.

DAVID SHENGOLD

## San Francisco

SAN FRANCISCO OPERA's new co-production of *Il barbiere di Siviglia* should serve nicely for the decade to come. Emilio Sagi's staging, a shared effort with the Lithuanian National Opera and Ballet Theatre, churns up plenty of laughs with its skewed perspectives, muted colour scheme and tactful updating. Since we're in Andalusia, a squad of flamenco dancers intermittently drills its way across the landscape. Llorenç Corbella's sets and Pepa Ojanguren's costumes have their eccentricities—why do characters enter from a crawlspace under the raised platform set?—but once the quirks stopped long enough for the principals actually to sing, the performance exuded style.

In the first of two casts, a pair of company debutants took honours. As Almaviva, the young Mexican lyric tenor Javier Camarena introduced an instrument of uncommon grace and elegance. A few dodgy high notes aside, this was model Rossini vocalism. Isabel Leonard possesses another one of those lyric mezzo-sopranos that have made this generation such a feast for Rossinians. At the November 19 performance, her minx of a Rosina revelled in plush tone, an adeptness at coloratura and a winning manner that narrowly skirted cuteness.

No question about the facility of Lucas Meacham's baritone, yet this Figaro seemed deficient in sheer panache. Alessandro Corbelli brought a still-robust bass-baritone and sharp theatrical instincts to his wizened Dr Bartolo. Andrea Silvestrelli's grumbling *basso* was made for Don Basilio. In her 50th assignment for the company, Catherine Cook contributed a hilariously slatternly Berta. The company's resident conductor Giuseppe Finzi presided over a complement that included a continuo accompaniment of both forte-piano and harpsichord. If absolute control of the reduced band (playing in a raised pit) was missing, Finzi merited praise for his understanding of the Rossini crescendo, which lent the first-act finale a captivating zaniness.

ALLAN ULRICH

## Washington

In light of Andrew Moravcsik's insightful essay (November 2013, pp. 1389-96) about the disheartening dearth of genuine Verdi and Wagner singers, I feel terribly sheepish admitting that I found WASHINGTON NATIONAL OPERA's new production of *La forza del destino* satisfying. To be sure, no one onstage could hold a vocal cord to the giants of the past, but nothing like that was expected. Still, the music was served with a good deal of passion and poetry—enough, it seemed, to justify programming an opera deemed impossible to cast today. Perhaps the bracing visual side of the staging, which found the director Francesca Zambello in decidedly provocative form, distracted the ear just enough to keep it from fully realizing the cast's inadequacies.

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