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## Humor, drama abound on opening day of Spoleto Festival

Lynn Felder/Winston-Salem Journal | Posted 2 months ago

CHARLESTON The 2015 Spoleto Festival USA opened at noon Friday with the usual fanfare – literally: the Charleston Symphony Orchestra Brass Ensemble played Aaron Copland’s “Fanfare for the Common Man” at high noon.

Unusually, members of Shakespeare’s Globe exhorted the crowd of festival-goers with a rousing Klezmer-sounding Italian song and then performed the Prologue of “Romeo and Juliet.”

Church bells rang, confetti flew, and the 38th Spoleto Festival was under way.

Besides the Opening Ceremony, six shows opened on Friday. I saw two: “Sleeping Beauty,” a marionette theater, and “Paradise Interrupted,” a world-premiere opera.

The juxtaposition of these two pieces reminded me of the powerful role that technology and, by extension, innovation, plays in the arts.

Starting with the low-tech: Marionettes remain much the same as they have for 4,000 years. Marionettes are articulated wooden puppets controlled from above by strings to give them remarkably realistic movement and expression.

The genre is best seen at close range or through very young eyes. Despite the detailed scenery, glimmering costumes of the puppets and clear acting style of the human animators, I found it a little difficult to suspend disbelief and get caught up in the story, so during intermission I consulted the experts.

One 7-year-old and two 5-year-old girls declared that it was very good. The 5-years-olds preferred the scene when the malevolent fairy godmother, Misery, gets the Princess Aurora to prick her finger. The 7-year-old liked the part when the forest grew to hide the cursed kingdom for 100 years.

Performed to recorded music by Tchaikovsky, “Sleeping Beauty” eventually drew me in. The sets and lighting were quite intricate and often fascinating, altogether a sweet and disarmingly simple family entertainment.

Then to the high-tech: “Paradise Interrupted” also interprets ancient stories but this time in contemporary context using contemporary technology.

The opera blends the stories of Eve with the Chinese drama of Du Liniang. After being banished from the Garden of Eden, Eve wanders in search of utopia. Similarly, Du Liniang goes on a journey after being awakened from a disturbing dream.

The Woman in “Paradise Interrupted” searches for an unattainable ideal in a world created by her voice.

And what a voice it is. Sung by the sublime Qian Yi, The Woman is on stage – and vocalizing – for nearly the entire show. She has help from the Elements, sung by Joseph Dennis, tenor; John Holiday, countertenor; Joo Won Kang, baritone; and Ao Li, bass-baritone, but Qian Yi carries the show.

It begins with The Woman in a white column dress, standing in virtual darkness on a blank white stage in front of a blank white screen. The orchestra, which is visible stage left, begins playing what sound like chimes singing bowls, but are just as likely Chinese instruments: The program lists sheng, dizi and pipa among the more familiar western strings and brass.

The music by Huang Ruo is beautiful, haunting, atonal at times and strange but intriguing.

The opera’s visual palette uses fantastic arrangements of black, white and gray with periodic additions of color, sometimes purple or scarlet, at one point the stage looks like the inside of a lotus, light-filled and ecstatic. Sometimes roiling clouds take on a surreal appearance, as hallucinatory as an old black-and-white Ingmar Bergman film.

The set itself is a sculpture, unfolding in unexpected ways, the way a festival will unfold - with a serving of tradition followed by a course of the new, sometimes surprising, mostly enjoyable, sometimes thrilling.

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