



OPERAVILLE

MONDAY, FEBRUARY 12, 2018

Tackling the Dutchman



Mason Gates (Helmsman) and Captain Daland's crew. All photos by Pat Kirk.

Opera San Jose
Wagner's *The Flying Dutchman*
February 10, 2018

Poor *Der Fliegende Hollander* can seem a little mired in its mid-19th century drydock, what with its overblown Romanticism and captained by a composer who's caught between feeling his oats and transforming the entire genre. Opera San Jose battled back these waves with a combination of perfect casting and stunning visual effects, the latter a suitable strategy for a Silicon Valley enterprise.

Set designer Steven C. Kemp evoked the sailing life with walls of sea-gray timbers. These served equally well as ship's flanks and projection screens.

The action began with the actual physical arrival of the Norwegian captain Daland with his boat and crew. Frustrated at the storm delaying a reunion with his daughter Senta, a mere seven miles away,

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ABOUT ME



 MICHAEL J. VAUGHN

Michael J. Vaughn is the author of seventeen novels, including *The Popcorn Girl* and *Billy Saddle*. His poetry has appeared in more than 100 journals, and he works as a competitions judge for *Writer's Digest*. He lives in San Jose, and plays drums for the San Francisco rock band *Exit Wonderland*.

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Daland sets the helmsman on watch and retires to his cabin. Tenor Mason Gates, who projects a Mickey Rooney get 'er done insouciance as the helmsman (complete with handstands!), sings a beautifully haunting ode to the southern winds, "Mit Gewitter und Sturm aus fernem Meer," and falls asleep.

And what a sleep! Soon a cloud forms over the bay and, thanks to Ian Wallace's stunning projection work, turns into the phantom ship of the Flying Dutchman, with its blood-red sails. The morose presence of the Dutchman (from baritone Noel Bouley) falls upon the shore and sings of his curse, condemned by Satan to wander the seas until, every seven years, he seeks a true woman to save him (don't we all?). When he gets to his wish for apocalypse, Wallace's projections turn to flames. It's an astounding effect, reminiscent of the visuals applied by San Francisco Opera to its acclaimed American Ring Cycle. Credit also to lighting designer David Lee Cuthbert for the overall effect on the stage.

Playing Captain Daland, bright-eyed baritone Gustav Andreassen makes the most of his comic opportunities, such as finding his helmsman fast asleep through the arrival of *an entire ghost ship*, and then discovering that the wealthy captain will give him all his treasure to marry his daughter. Andreassen has a likeable upward swoop to his voice, and it serves him well when he responds, "I have always wanted such a son-in-law."



Mary (Nicole Birkland) and the spinning ladies.

Act II moves to a spinning room, where the village women produce clothing for their absent men. Senta has an intense interior life (much like the Dutchman) and dotes on his portrait, deeply involved in her own compassion for him (parents with teenage daughters know this phenomenon well). She sings Senta's Ballad, telling of the ghost sailor's plight. New York soprano Kerriann Otaño has a bit of weight to her tone, and uses it well, painting the haunting tale in alternating darks and lights. She also has a suitably regal bearing, augmented by

Senta's royal blue dress and black shawl (costume designer Johann Stegmeir). She also, inconveniently enough, has a boyfriend, Erik, a hunter who is appalled at hearing her sing of another man with such passion. At first I thought that Derek Taylor's tenor lacked life, but no, it's a lovely instrument. Wagner purposely saddled Erik with a conventional aria, "Mein Herz voll Treue bis zum Sterben," in an opera of unconventional arias, as a way of portraying him as yesterday's news (talk about taking one for the team!) while pitting him against the ghost of Lord Byron, for God's sake. It's like finding out your wife is getting calls from George Clooney.



Kerriann Otano (Senta) and Noel Bouley (The Dutchman).

Because there he is, the actual Flying Dutchman, and he's entering the house next to Senta's father! The chemistry is immediate, evoked by the quiet beginning of their duet. Stage director Brad Dalton responds to this quietude with physical stillness, at times simply placing the two in close proximity as the music overwhelms them. The long duet, which presages the historic duet of Tristan und Isolde, grows organically, advancing in dynamic and tempo levels until it shifts from E major to E minor and threatens to subsume the theater. It's a *very* Wagnerian moment.

The static quality of the rest of the act is a challenge – compare this to the frenetic staging of a Mozart, Rossini or Verdi – so a shift back to the waterfront is a welcome reprieve, back to the rowdiness of the

excellent Norwegian crew/chorus (director Andrew Whitfield), who are drinking and yo-ho-ho-ing with Jack Sparrow-like delight. Toasting the impending wedding, they stomp and challenge the Dutch crew to appear, then watch aghast as they do, looking like the road crew of a two-year Slayer tour.

From there, the technicalities of the deal-with-the-devil plot get a little irksome. The Dutchman finds that Senta had a boyfriend before him (gasp!) and heads back to his ship, resolved that his exit clause is disqualified. Senta hurls herself into the bay to save him. In these days of retro misogyny, Wagner's whole weird view of the female gender is tiresome. I still haven't forgiven him for offing Brunnhilde (the most unnecessary immolation ever), and it seems that the place of women in his universe is to save the sorry butts of their men and all they have to do to accomplish this is to die terrible deaths (Am I right, sisters?).

That said, OSJ made the absolute best of the moment, blinding the audience with stadium lights as Senta walked into them, a la *Close Encounters*, and transformed herself into an angel, followed by an actual angel representing the Dutchman's redemption. It was a glorious moment of theater, inspiring one patron to comment, "When did this turn into *Angels in America*?"

Joseph Marcheso conducted masterfully, and the horns in the overture were Wagner-perfect. The company's founder, Irene Dalis, performed a lot of Wagner in her Met days, and modeled the California Theater's pit after the one at Bayreuth. It's fantastic to hear that OSJ will be following this up with Jake Heggie's epic *Moby Dick* next season. I regret that Nicole Birkland had that role that doesn't get mentioned much (Mary), but her head shot belongs on the cover of *Vogue*. I love the artificial sea foam in the opening, and the projected waves had me running for the exit. Taylor's Erik finds vocal redemption in his Dream Aria, much more advanced and Wagnerian. Thanks to the girl in the flame dress (someone should write a novel by that name) and to Veronika Agronov-Dafoe, my secret Russian colluder. Robert Mueller, you know where to find me.

Through February 25 at the California Theater, 345 South First Street, San Jose. www.operasj.org.

\$56-\$176. 408/437-4450,

Michael J. Vaughn is a thirty-year opera critic and author of twenty novels, plus the recent non-fiction book, *Atheist Evolution*. The atheist take on Wagner is, well, Satan doesn't exist, angels don't exist, and Christians have a weird way of worshipping and simultaneously oppressing their women. So there. He is due to marry Renee Fleming as soon as the restraining order expires, and congratulates his sister-

in-arms, Kirsten Kunkle, for winning the role of Giorgietta in Puccini's Il Tabarro in Philadelphia.

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