

Review: 'The Flying Dutchman'

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Opera San Jose sails away with Wagner's 'The Flying Dutchman'

February 14, 2018 by Tad Malone



Kerriann Otaño plays Senta in Opera San Jose's production of 'The Flying Dutchman.' Photo by Pat Kirk

The penultimate production of Opera San Jose's 2017-18 season—*The Flying Dutchman*—is a turbulent tour through the calamities and myths of the sea, as well as an examination of what lies beneath the promise of true love.

The classic opera was written by an up-and-coming 26-year-old German composer in the 1830s. These days, Richard Wagner is known far and wide for his dramatic and explosive operas that strike at the heart of the German identity (as well as being the favorite composer of the Third Reich).

But back then, Wagner was one of many popular composers, who was also

running up debts across Europe with his extravagant lifestyle—to the point that he had his passport seized. While attempting to return from Riga, Latvia, to London, Wagner and his pregnant wife found passage on a boat whose captain was willing to overlook the lack of identification. That journey, along with Heinrich Heine's satire, "The Memoirs of Mister von Schnabelewopski," inspired Wagner to write his now-timeless opera, *The Flying Dutchman*.

Opera San Jose's rendition of *Dutchman* opens on a ship traversing the stormy seas off southern Norway. They are driven off course into a small bay, and the ship's captain, Daland, commands a steersman to keep watch while he and the rest of the crew sleep. Soon the steersman has also fallen asleep. While he's dreaming, a ghost ship makes anchor in the same waters and the ship's spectral captain laments his fate—to ride the waves to the end of time.

The hex will only be broken if the damned captain—The Flying Dutchman—can find a wife. Lucky for the Dutchman, Daland has a daughter.

The two captains get to talking and quickly strike a deal; the Dutchman will marry Daland's daughter, Senta, in exchange for a chest of treasure. The group returns to Daland's home together, where a series of events, involving love, fidelity, and the revelation of identity will

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eventually send the Dutchman on to the next life.

Wagner's operas are known for their high stakes and high drama, and *The Flying Dutchman* is no exception. Opera San Jose, at this point a veteran production house, is finely attuned to these qualities and approaches each element of *The Flying Dutchman* with artistic acumen.

This follows through to the cast, who do a lively and arguably spellbinding job of bring the trials of the cursed Dutchman to life. Daland, played by Gustav Andreassen, is both bubbly and forthright, portraying a lost seaman who is blind to the mythical consequences of such a valuable dowry. The steersman is played by Mason Gates with a characteristic youthful confidence, accentuated with a light but encompassing tenor. Kerriann Otaño plays Senta with a true sense of love and longing, emphasized by her powerful soprano. The standout performance, however, goes to the show's namesake, the Dutchman. Played by Noel Bouley with a palpable sense of ethereal despondency, Bouley brings the character alive with his astounding and rich baritone. Together, the cast finds moments of humor that don't feel corny and moments of horror that don't feel forced, working through each of the story's steps with an understated believability.

The set for Opera San Jose's production of *The Flying Dutchman* is so fully realized that it should count as a member of the cast—breathing life into the austere treachery of the sea. Set on a slant from on high down toward the orchestra pit, the stage works as a representation of the ship's hull, as well as a gently sloping shore. This optical illusion is reinforced by the use of a three-sided digital projection of the stormy ocean, which changes and shifts tone depending on the scene.

It is an arresting set—minimal yet powerful and capable of shifting seamlessly between the salty deck of a working vessel and the haunted hold of a ship lost in time. Working in contrasts, Opera San Jose finds the perfect way to display the moods of death and mythos in the midst of a tender love story.

All this, combined with Wagner's bombastic score, results in a rewarding and engrossing recitation on love and loss. Ultimately, Opera San Jose's reproduction of *The Flying Dutchman* is a beautiful, haunting, and at moments downright exciting journey through the unknown, both in love and in the ocean's waves.

The Flying Dutchman

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