

Big themes, big performances boost 'Our American Cousin'

Boston Globe - Boston, Mass.

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Date: Jun 23, 2008

NORTHAMPTON - It is rare to encounter an opera premiere outside the big cities or big festivals but Amherst composer Eric Sawyer and Berkeley poet John Shoptaw have done the almost-impossible. They raised \$100,000 (from foundations and generous individuals), enlisted the talent (some of it from Opera Boston), and produced their new opera, "Our American Cousin," on Friday at the Academy of Music in this town. This was its first fully staged performance. The Boston Modern Orchestra Project was in the pit, led by Gil Rose. Six hundred people turned out, which must be considered a good showing for such a venture.

Aaron Copland referred to opera as "la forme fatale." Its difficulties are legion, but when it works, it is a miracle. Opera explores hidden parts of the psyche as nothing else can, through the heightened emotional speech that is singing, and in an atmosphere close to dream, in which characters move in and out of our subconscious. We are all Carmen or Don Giovanni, Boris Godunov, or Mephistopheles for a time.

"Our American Cousin" has no such complex central personality. This is something different: an opera of ideas. Set in the immediate aftermath of the Civil War, it explores big, rather vague themes - the nature of playacting versus responsibility, for one; the healing powers of art, for another - while, in the foreground, we witness the preparation and presentation of a Victorian melodrama, "Our American Cousin," at Ford's Theatre on Lincoln's last night.

The set (designed by Christopher Ostrom) shows us Ford's Theatre from an angle, with a small, candlelit stage, seats for an audience, and the presidential box with bunting on stage left. This worked well for the "Cousin" scenes. For the more intimate backstage action, the players' plotting, reflecting, and joking, the small stage seemed far away. Director Carole Charnow might have used the Academy's own projecting boxes to wrap the drama around us.

The singer-actors were all splendid. Everyone was up to Sawyer's difficult intervals and enunciated so well that the supertitles overhead were unnecessary. They acted as well as they sang. Among the best turns were Alan Schneider's as the well-meaning bumpkin Asa Dundreary and Aaron Engebret's oily John Coyle. Janna Baty, as Laura Keene, the proprietress of the troupe and the lead in "Cousin," sang with full, round tone and a strong presence.

In Act II, we get "Our American Cousin," a good deal of it. Sawyer's music becomes lighter and points up the bad jokes and stock sentiment with touches of popular song. In the middle, Lincoln (Donald Wilkinson) sings a brief aria about his ugliness, the Constitution, and what sounds like guilt over his late awakening to the evil of slavery.

In Act III, John Wilkes Booth has his big moment. This is puzzlingly underplayed. A program note tells us this was deliberate, to shift the focus to the other characters. Why, then, have Booth (Tom O'Toole) lurk and sing so impressively beforehand? And, here, at this crucial moment, Sawyer's music falls silent, when the crowd would have been churning with laughter, shouts, and shrieks.

"Our American Cousin" has creaky joints, too many overlapping situations, and a constantly shifting focus. At the same time, it has several passages when words and music come together exquisitely. One is the series of choruses in Act I, when the Ford's Theatre audience turns and reforms into groups representing the war's human aftermath - amputees, freedmen, nurses, carpetbaggers, etc., singing words culled from real diaries and letters. Here is Sawyer's most beautiful music, drenched in a bittersweet chromaticism reminiscent of Benjamin Britten's War Requiem. These, and a final chorus condemning the cycle of "blood for blood," might well be packaged separately. They speak clearly to our day.

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