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ON THE WEB

OPERA REVIEW | JULLIARD OPERA

Emotional Torment, With Impulsive Volatility



Nan Melville for The New York Times

Randall Scotting and Erin Morley are joined by the Fairies in Britten's "Midsummer Night's Dream."

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For all its scenes of dancing fairies, woodland revels and hapless rustic mortals who fancy themselves tragedians, Britten's "Midsummer Night's Dream" is a disturbing opera. Britten makes you confront the twisted conflicts that lurk just below the surface of Shakespeare's fantastical play.

Still, a production must find a balance between the whimsical and ominous elements of this entrancing 1960 work. The production by the Juilliard Opera Center that opened on Wednesday night at the school's Peter Jay Sharp Theater achieves this balance through the richness of the performance and the inventiveness of the staging. Moreover, seeing the opera performed by a young and eager cast works wonders, especially in the story line involving the two Athenian couples who are so muddled in their passions even before Oberon, the king of the fairies, interferes with his herbal potion.

The emotional torment these characters go through seems volatile and impulsive when the roles are sung, as they are here, by intense, gifted and attractive student singers.

The familiar story turns on a battle between the preening and coolly seductive Oberon and his headstrong wife, Tytania, over custody of an orphaned boy. Oberon wants the boy to be his henchman, an idea that horrifies Tytania, who suspects that Oberon's feelings are tinged with thwarted desire. Besides, she has seen the way her husband bullies the sprightly Puck into doing his bidding.

Britten's powers of evocation are strongest in this alluring score. Oberon, a countertenor (here Randall Scotting, an impressive guest artist) and Tytania, a coloratura soprano (the agile and bright-toned Erin Morley), sing in grandiloquent lines that recall English Baroque opera, but with wayward chromatic turns and spiky modern harmonies. When the rustics present their bungled version of the tragedy of Pyramus and Thisbe, Britten deftly parodies bel canto opera, complete with a mini-mad scene for the heroine.

To conduct, Juilliard brought in David Atherton, an acclaimed Britten interpreter. Britten calls for a chamber-sized orchestra, but the Juilliard Theater Orchestra could use some reinforcements in the strings. (A last-minute injury to a violist left that section with only one player.) Still, Mr. Atherton draws some lithe and colorful playing from the orchestra, and the chorus of fairies sounds ethereal, though I wish the choristers would work harder on articulating the text.

The Athenian lovers are excellent: Jeremy Little, a clarion lyric tenor, as Lysander; Faith Sherman, a luminous mezzo-soprano, as Hermia; Matthew Worth, a dynamic baritone, as Demetrius; Ariana Wyatt, a dusky-toned soprano, as Helena. The strapping bass Matt Boehler makes an endearingly bumbling Bottom.

The production, directed by [Eve](#) Shapiro and choreographed by Jeanne Slater, plays before a light-reflecting set of hanging strips of Mylar, with movable poles to suggest the thin trunks of trees in the woods at night.

Over all the production succeeds at making the opera's world of slumber and dreams seem not too inviting. In the final scene, when the Duke of Athens (Sidney Outlaw) blesses the young couples and says, "Lovers to bed, 'tis almost fairy time," you think to yourself, "Oh, no, not again."