

## The New York Times

### OPERA REVIEW

# Eerie Echo Of Present In Futurist Fantasy

By ANTHONY TOMMASINI

ST. PAUL, May 11 — It's the early 21st century, and a tremor at the San Andreas Fault has devastated nuclear power plants in California. War and environmental havoc have caused famine and infertility throughout the United States. Right-wing Christian fanatics have assassinated the president and the Congress, reconstituting the nation as a male-controlled totalitarian state called Gilead in which women are deprived of all rights. Some of those still able to breed are enslaved as handmaids, after the biblical story of Jacob and Rachel, and forced to copulate with high-ranking commanders in degrading threesomes involving the commanders' barren wives.

Margaret Atwood fans will recognize the plot of her apocalyptic 1984 novel, "The Handmaid's Tale," a book both derided as a preposterous polemic and devoured as a chilling fantasy that explored the implications of fundamentalism from the Moral Majority to the Taliban.

The story may seem a bit much to pack into an evening at the opera, but the ingenious Danish composer Poul Ruders thought otherwise. "The Handmaid's Tale," Mr. Ruders's second opera, received its premiere at the Royal Danish Opera in 2000. On Saturday night the Minnesota Opera presented the work's North American premiere in a spare yet effective production here at the Ordway Center for the Performing Arts.

It was an ambitious move for this regional company, part of an ambitious cultural weekend in the Twin Cities. On Friday night the Minnesota Orchestra, deftly conducted by James Conlon, gave an assured performance of Mahler's ecstatic Symphony No. 8, the so-called "Symphony of a Thousand," at Orchestra Hall in Minneapolis.

But the Ruders opera was the major event. Too many new operas in recent years have been well conceived but musically negligible. "The Handmaid's Tale" is dramatically convoluted, no argument there. But it is so musically inventive that you get pulled in anyway.

The story is told in flashbacks. At an international video conference in

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2195 a professor is giving a lecture on two monotheocratic states in the early 21st century: Iran and Gilead. A newly discovered audio cassette diary recorded by a handmaid from the long-gone Christian republic is played for the conference participants.

So the opera unfolds as disconnected scenes from the life of Offred, who, as all handmaids must, takes her name from that of her commander: she is "of Fred." The narrative device keeps the focus on Offred, who is given several halting, poignant monologues that may find their ways to the recital stage.

In addition Mr. Ruders and his British librettist, Paul Bentley, whose original English text (performed here) was translated into Danish for the Copenhagen premiere, invent a character called Offred's Double, who portrays her in earlier times when she had a husband and a daughter. The result is deliberately cinematic, as the opera cross-cuts between the handmaid's life before and after the revolution.

Offred (here sung with rich soprano sound and suppleness by Elizabeth Bishop in a calmly dignified performance) and her younger double (Megan Dey-Toth, a winsome lyric soprano) interact with each other musically, climaxing when the two voices converge in an unconventional duet. Their elegiac melody, sung in unison, is enshrined by Mr. Ruders's hazy orchestra harmonies spiked with quizzical dissonances and spectral colors.

In places Mr. Ruders ironically adapts older musical idioms, like his bizarre settings of "Amazing Grace," associated with Serena Joy, a former gospel singer, now the wife of Offred's commander. The familiar

hymn is undercut by gloppy chromatic chords and piercing discordant notes, like some futuristic facsimile of angelic music. Relentless Minimalistic riffs agitate a chorus of Gilead's class of frenetic maids, who impart dogma to the handmaids and enforce the procreative regimen.

Yet for long stretches the score just breathes and sighs in shimmering, quasi-atonal harmonies, enriched by an array of electronic instruments, while the characters converse in singable vocal lines that somehow sound elusive. The striking exception is the role of the maniacal Aunt Lydia (the soprano Helen Todd), whose jagged coloratura flights make her seem a sci-fi cousin of Mozart's avenging Queen of the Night.

Overall the stage director, Eric Simonson, elicits tellingly detailed portrayals from the cast. The veteran mezzo-soprano Joyce Castle is the formidable Serena Joy. The bass Gabor Andrasy brings a Sean Connery-like gravity to the role of Offred's commander.

Young Daniel Montenegro's sweet lyric tenor and gentleness were just right for Nick, the commander's guardian, who is compelled by Serena Joy to copulate in secret with Offred because months of coupling with the commander have produced no pregnancy. The most touching moment of this hellish fantasy comes when in a wistful soliloquy Offred recalls those encounters with Nick: for a few moments she actually remembered what it was like to desire a man.

The set and costume designer, Robert Israel, frames the stage area with large painted flats and a few movable pieces, and he dresses the characters simply. (The handmaids wore frumpy linen dresses with the emblem of their caste on front; Nick wears workman's overalls.) Antony Walker conducted what seemed a vibrant performance, though the sound of the orchestra, especially the strings, was somewhat muffled by a stage extension that enhanced the intimacy of the theater but covered too much of the pit.

There are three more performances of "The Handmaid's Tale" through Sunday. Add it to the list of recent works that the Metropolitan Opera should feel obliged to present, a list that includes Kaija Saariaho's "L'Amour de Loin" and Nicolas Maw's "Sophie's Choice."