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Ruders' opera captures power, poignancy of 'Handmaid's Tale'

By Thomas May
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ST. PAUL — *The Handmaid's Tale*, Margaret Atwood's nightmarish 1985 novel, still holds a shockingly contemporary resonance.

But the power of Atwood's future theocratic dystopia also derives from the universality of its characters and their desire to break free of ideological straitjackets.

Opera review

That quality is what attracted Danish composer Poul Ruders to create an opera based on the book. Premiered at the Royal Danish Opera in 2000, *The Handmaid's Tale* (★★★ out of four) was given its North American premiere during the weekend in a bold production by the Minnesota Opera at its home in St. Paul's Ordway Center.

The libretto by Paul Bentley craftily restructures Atwood's first-person chronicle into cinematically brief scenes switching between past and present. Framing two symmetrically shaped acts is a videoconference from a later, more enlightened era that examines tapes made by a woman who lived during the transition from the Time Before into the first years of the Republic of Gilead (formerly the USA) early in the 21st century.

Gilead is a violently repressive regime — think Arthur Miller's *The Crucible* presided over by the Taliban — in which fertile women who have violated strict moral codes are treated as chattel. Their sole function is to perform as "handmaids," or enslaved surrogate



By Michal Daniel, The Minnesota Opera

Mother and daughter: Elizabeth Bishop as Offred, right, and Maeve Moynihan in the Minnesota Opera's production of Atwood's 1985 novel.

mothers, to help restore a decimated population. The handmaid of the title, known as Offred, undergoes brainwashing at a re-education center before being sent off for mandatory impregnation. She reluctantly joins in an underground resistance effort and is arrested, though her ultimate fate remains ambiguous.

Ambiguity is also evident in Ruders' tough-to-classify music. His idiosyncratic style draws on many sources, not as a postmodern hodge-podge but as a refined technique to differentiate the story's psychological polarities.

Thickly clouded, ominous harmonies give way to poignant minimalist tonality as Offred recalls her

lost happiness with her lover and child from the Time Before. Terrifying orchestral swells segue into silence, while the tune of *Amazing Grace* is threaded through the score in distortions that musically mirror Gilead's own enforced perversion.

Ruders' vocal lines are often straightforward in their expressiveness. As Offred, mezzo Elizabeth Bishop shapes a moving, richly wrought performance with her complex vocal acting. The fullness and warmth of her instrument make an excellent foil both to the shrill hysteria conjured by Helen Todd as the fanatic brainwasher Aunt Lydia and to the cold, accusing alto of Joyce Castle in a memo-



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rable portrayal of chain-smoking Serena Joy, ex-gospel singer and wife of a top party official, the Commander. In that role, bass Gabor Andrasz manages to evince some sympathy as a victim of the system, though also one of its chief perpetrators.

Director Eric Simonson and designer Robert Israel conjure a dis-

turbingly authoritarian world of conformism bathed in antiseptic, clinical fluorescent light. It amplifies the costumes' combination of Puritan themes with elements of kitsch, against a backdrop of hanged corpses that never allow the audience to forget the social contract of cruelty and violence on which Gilead is founded.

Conductor Antony Walker displays theatrically informed, fluid leadership. One major quail: The largely covered pit often veils Ruders' exquisitely calibrated orchestration with a muffled vagueness.

But all in all, this well-conceived production restores confidence in the possibilities of contemporary opera as compelling theater.