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THE WALL STREET JOURNAL. LEISURE & ARTS THURSDAY, MAY 15, 2003

Opera: Feminist Qualms in Gilead

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By Heidi Waleson

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The subject and style of "The Handmaid's Tale," Margaret Atwood's apocalyptic 1985 novel, make it a challenge for adaptation into opera. Yet remarkably, the Danish composer Poul Ruders and English librettist Paul Bentley have added a new dimension to this time-shifting, internal monologue of memory. The novel is a cautionary tale; the opera, given its North American premiere on Saturday by the Minnesota Opera at the Ordway Center, uses music to deepen and humanize the title character, thereby taking it beyond polemic.

Mr. Bentley has followed Ms. Atwood's tale closely: In 21st-century America, now called Gilead, religious fundamentalists have overthrown the government and instituted a theocracy, one of whose basic principles is the relegation of women to subordinate status. Rampant pollution and environmental disaster have rendered most of the population infertile, so the creation of children is a priority. Handmaids, a caste of women based on the Genesis tale of Rachel, Jacob, and Rachel's servant, are assigned to the society's leaders (Commanders) for purposes of procreation. As mere vessels, they are even deprived of their names; the heroine is called only Offred (of-Fred). Her worm's eye view reveals a society, which, like the fundamentalist Islamic nations such as Iran from which Ms. Atwood drew much of her inspiration, is obsessed with female purity, modesty and childbearing. Repression of individuality, brutal control and extreme punishment keep people in line.

The opera's 45 scenes, some only minutes long, occur in three different time periods: After Offred's training for her Handmaid's role, we see her life in her Commander's house, intercut with scenes from the Time Before, in which her world is overthrown and she is brutally separated from her husband and child. The opera sometimes feels overly busy: Some of the plot elements could probably have been eliminated without damaging the story.

Through these swift changes, however, Mr. Ruders's musical language skillfully builds and maintains a consistent tone and atmosphere. Though the character of the music shifts dramati-

cally from the frantic, pulsating rhythms of the flashback scenes to the chilling tonal echoes of sacred chorales as the Handmaids and other Gileadeans mechanically repeat their dogma, the sense of dread, damage and loss is clear. Those deceptively soothing chorales, punctuated by bells, become as ominous as the violent orchestral outbursts that show the true character that underlies the new order.

Set against this dismal world is Offred, movingly sung by mezzo-soprano Elizabeth Bishop. Her affecting, yearning meditations, often sung nearly a cappella or set against spare, transparent orchestration, reveal her depth as a woman and as a mother whose child has been taken from her. Although forced to conform on the surface to the Handmaid's limited life, with one ugly uniform, rigidly policed language and personal contacts, no reading or writing allowed, Offred's passion and humanity keep breaking through. She resists her fate by telling her story. By making Offred so compelling, Mr. Ruders and Ms. Bishop elevate the tale beyond grim futuristic fiction into art.

By comparison, the other characters are thin. Soprano Helen Todd made a brave case for Aunt Lydia, the Handmaids' enforcer and a true believer, making her high-pitched, vituperative vocal part deliberately unbearable. The other characters, all well-cast in Minnesota, are sketched even more lightly: the Handmaid Ofglen, sung with crystalline purity by Tracey Gorman; Serena Joy, the Commander's bitter wife, played with bent malice by Joyce Castle; the rule-bending Commander (the sonorous Gabor Andrasy); the lively, nonconformist Moira (Karin Wolverton); and the pathetic, mad Handmaid Janine (Genieve Christianson). Offred's younger self (Megan Dey-Toth) appeared with her husband Luke (Dennis Petersen) in the flashback scenes and got to sing a duet with the older Offred. The chorus coped admirably with the groupthink ensemble parts and Antony Walker was the capable conductor.

Robert Israel's simple set, its decoration of gray stippling, shadowy naked figures and the watching Eye said to be

inspired by the grim images of Anselm

THE HANDMAID'S TALE

Minnesota Opera at the Ordway Center
Tonight, May 17 and 18

Kiefer, dealt efficiently with the many scene changes. The Commander's house, a white box with multiple faces, was trundled around the stage to show Offred's room, the Commander's study and Serena Joy's parlor, while a large black block moved across the rear of the stage to change the shape of the space. As the opera progressed, more hanged "criminals" were lowered from the flies in orange jumpsuits with bags over their heads. The only visual relief came at the end, with a welcome vision of trees showing Offred's escape (perhaps) across the border to Canada.

The novel describes the women in the book as rigidly color-coded, with the Handmaids in nun-like red habits and head-dresses with large, face-concealing wings. Mr. Israel opted for drab smocks and caps, less concealing but certainly not alluring. Eric Simonson's direction, while occasionally too busy, captured the lockstep quality of the society as well as the rebellion just barely suppressed beneath it.

Ms. Waleson last wrote for the Journal on "Così Fan Tutte."



Elizabeth Bishop
Offred in the op
Margaret Atwoo



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