

THE BUFFALO NEWS

ARTS AND ENTERTAINMENT

July 25, 2005

By Herman Trotter
NEWS MUSIC CRITIC EMERITUS

CHAUTAUQUA – The Chautauqua Opera has done well by Robert Ward's 1962 Pulitzer Prize-winning opera, "The Crucible".

If my memory is correct, this is its fourth production in the opera's 44-year history. I have seen the last three, coming away from each with the conviction that "The Crucible" is one of the great American operas.

That said, it is an engrossing and expressive opera, but not easy to watch. It's based on Arthur Miller's like-named play about the fabled Salem witch trials of 1692 and was intended as an allegory on Sen. Joe McCarthy's dogged hunt for communist sympathizers in our society in the 1950s.

Because of the very frenzied nature of the Salem witch trials, full of unrelentingly severe, holier-than-thou accusers, countercharges of lying and duplicitous Puritans using the witch hunt to camouflage land grabs or sexual misdemeanors, both the stage action and Ward's musical score are very dense.

There are 13 important roles in the opera, with a couple of dozen lesser parts and chorus members. There is so much going on that even though the opera is in English, supertitles in English would have been helpful, because one could only rarely hear the words clearly.

What Ward has created, then, is a wonderfully unified, coherent continuum of orchestral,

OPERA REVIEW

"The Crucible"

Friday night. Program repeats at 7:30
Tonight at Norton Memorial Hall,
Chautauqua Institution, off Route 394,
Chautauqua; 357-6250

vocal and dramatic art whose total effect is considerably more than the sum of its parts.

The music is consistently lyrical and appealing, but without the usual face-front arias.

The rugged colonial hymn, "Jesus, My Consolation" that concludes Act 1, Judge Danforth's invocation "Open Thou My Lips" in Act 3 and the slave girl Tituba's wailing spiritual "The Devil Say He's Coming" in Act 4 are the only hummable tunes that will linger in your mind, but the overall effect will last for quite a while.

Ward's imaginative use of the orchestra is especially riveting in the connecting passages leading from one dramatic episode to the next, and the piercingly dissonant final cadence during the walk to the gallows is a shattering tonal summation of the tragedy.

The Chautauqua production directed by Jay Lesenger opened at Opera Boston in April and will be presented in Mobile, Ala., in October. Visually it is a gem, with a stunning set by Steven Capone of widely spaced, weathered gray wall and floor boards easily adapted as a living space, the courtroom or the barn/jail interior with a dozen ominous nooses suspended overhead,

all reflecting the stern Puritan lifestyle. Christopher Ostrum's lighting, with prominent use of silhouetting, and Nancy Leary's predominantly brown and reddish brown costuming reinforce the starkness of life.

The two pivotal roles are the prominent farmer John Proctor, sung with strong forceful projections by baritone Brian Davis, and Abigail Williams, with whom Proctor once had a fleeting affair. Soprano Jane Ohmes plays this role with dramatic cunning in using their secret as a weapon and sings with a strong but overly tremulous voice.

Proctor's knowing but forgiving wife, Elizabeth, is unobtrusively but winningly sung by mezzo Janine Hawley. As the witchcraft expert Rev. Hale, bass Ethan Herschenfeld's rather hollow voice is offset by his dramatic acuity. Others who acquit themselves well in major roles are tenor Matthew Chellis as Rev. Parris, contralto Sabrina Elayne Carten as Tituba, contralto Joyce Castle as Rebecca Nurse and tenor Jeffrey Halili as Giles Corey.

As is so often the case at Chautauqua, what makes this huge cast of professionals and apprentices work so well together is the knowing, inspired direction of Lesenger. Tonight's 7:30 repeat performance of "The Crucible" can be strongly recommended, but be sure to arrive early enough to get a program and familiarize yourself with the complex scenario, or you might feel lost at times.