

Opera Now

Travel 2007

Hot House

Vanessa, Barber

By Karyl Lynn Charna

CHAUTAUQUA OPERA

Vanessa is a chilling psychological drama, dealing with an intriguing set of dilemmas: what is illusion and what is reality? Should one compromise or fight for one's ideals and fantasies? It's a poignant work, transcending specific emotions and experiences to explore a universal struggle: how to cope with what life throws at you. Widely acclaimed at its world premiere in 1958, the opera radiates rich melodic lines and is absorbing and dramatically compelling work of Straussian fluency.

Samuel Barber had a great feel for drama and a remarkable ability to write lyrical music that expresses inner emotional turmoil and psychological conflict. In Chautauqua, director Jay Lesenger captures it all with spine-tingling accuracy. Only the tired, generic set of an aristocratic country-house interior, made macabre with black cloths covering every mirror and portrait, was disappointing. One of the most chilling moments was when Vanessa, still believing it was her lover who has arrives, asks, 'Do you love me still,' and young Anatol replies, 'Yes, I believe I will'. When Erika decides to reject Anatol's marriage proposal, 'No, I'll leave you to Vanessa,' her anguish was as poignantly expressed as any Puccini heroine.



Brenda Harris made an aloof and detached Vanessa, her substantial voice searing with anguish and joy. Keri Alkema's fine melodic vocal line captured Erika's emotional turmoil and inner struggles. Frédéric Antoun's suitably slimy Anatol worked well, and his delicious high notes thrilled.

Chautauqua is limited by its tiny orchestra pit that fits only 38 musicians. Only the recent availability of a reduced orchestration of Barber's opera made this staging possible. Conductor Antony Walker, however, drew a full orchestra sound – so full, indeed that at times he overwhelmed the singers. Otherwise, he did a commendable job in maintaining the dramatic tension and exploring the psychological undercurrents of the score. Chautauqua's orchestra, which so disappointed last year, must be applauded for its outstanding execution of this complex music.