

Marriage, Murder and Masochism by BLC©2004

Three New American Works, 12th Annual Commissioned Program. Jack Gottlieb: *The English Lesson* • Ned Rorem: *The Robbers* • Yoav Gal: *Venus in Furs*. Various vocalists; Chamber ensemble/ Thomas Carlo Bo. Presented by Golden Fleece Ltd., Lou Rodgers, producing artistic director. Educational Alliance Theatre, NY, NY. March 4-7, 2004. (*commissioned work)

These annual commissioned programs continue to bear the special stamp of Lou Rodgers but in a much better light now, we are happy to report. The new theater at the Goldman Y on Manhattan's East 14th Street, offers a larger stage, comfortable terraced seating and simply a brighter atmosphere for performing artists to work in, certainly when compared with the former musty, bare-boned settings. She may not have the resources for stage sets and larger musical forces, and the singers are devotees rather than celebs, but how can one not appreciate the obsessiveness of Lou Rodgers to see that the show goes on with as much talent as she can muster.

To better evaluate the product of #12, we tried something we had mostly avoided be-



fore, attending two performances and comparing the two rotating casts (the usual Rodgers procedure). As it turned out, we got more than we bargained for. Observations can be made about more than just cast comparisons; we learned something about the reviewer's own limitations in seeing, hearing and maintaining energy, acuity and memory. Ingredients that are essential to fair criticism. Now we must ask ourselves if our reactions to the initial visit were indeed fair. The first two works seemed studied and uninspired with singers going through the motions with poor intonation and a flatness of delivery. Was it the critic who was lethargic and not the performers? (Yes, a critic

needs to be "up" for an event, too.) But lo, on our return visit, everything lived up; the singers sang more beautifully, with accurate intonation, and all three works had moments of brilliance missed earlier. Truly? One of the major participants totally agreed with us. It was not simply our imagination.

In retrospect, Mr. Gottlieb's *The English Lesson* was thoroughly tuneful and charming. This composer, known for his many art songs, faced the challenge of setting Shakespeare's Act III, Scene IV of *Henry V* to continuous music which would convey the Bard's humanity and wit. Performances would be crucial. We think Laura Green, as the French-speaking Katharine, offered in marriage to the English monarch by her father, Charles, struck the right note of girlish glee while bumbling her way through her English lessons. (All of this is sung in French.) Ms. Surkin, playing her attendant Alice and using her wide-ranging mezzo voice well, looked properly worried over her mistress's slow progress. They seemed brighter and better cast than Heather Green and Donna Slawsky.

In *The Robbers*, the comparison may not be as critical since Patrick Lynch, forcefully playing and singing the central calculating figure among a trio of killer bandits, appeared in both rotations. The piece, which opens with an onstage murder, has some nuances of character, but the plot, based on Chaucer, is by now pretty standard stuff. One obvious difference was the playing of the leader by actors of different ages. The somewhat older Eugene Green—none of the three Greens are related—was a bit wiser but wearier, while Juan Jose Ibarra delivered a cool-headed and greedier portrayal. The role of the novice, who is remorseful at what he has just done, was played and sung with a stronger sense of guilt and desire for redemption by Keith Borden, as compared with Michael Schilke. Aesthetically, there is no question Mr. Rorem has a musical sensitivity that is unchallenged. If his libretto won't win any awards, his use of a lyrical tonal setting for piano and cello is the right foil for the chromatic singing onstage. A big moment comes near the end when the three robbers (all baritones) express themselves in a first-rate canonic trio with a big climax. The violent ending then wastes no time following.

Mr. Gal's *Venus in Furs* is one of those events that might have come with a warning: "The following program features scenes of sado-masochism and may be disturbing to some." Indeed, the opera's libretto is based on the novel by Leopold von Sacher-Masoch. There's no nudity. Tantalizing might be a fitting adjective, since any time you put an attractive, sensual woman onstage wearing a minimally decorous red dress, accompanied by two masked women in black tights bumping and grinding their way on and off the stage and bending

over suggestively as they tie up Mr. Masochist for his feel-good punishment, you are sure to get attention.

This "love affair" between the cruel Wanda and the adoring Severin (based on Leopold's own true-life character) is portrayed in 10 vignettes. In #5, entitled "The Contract," Severin is invited to sign not only his consent to be treated as a slave but his own death warrant exonerating anyone of a crime; he does so eagerly. In #10 the final degradation occurs. A gentleman, known simply as the Greek, who is Wanda's manly lover, enters and is handed a menacing whip. All five characters freeze as if posing for a photo and the house mercifully goes dark.

Heather Green, as Wanda, seemed a bit more enticing than Amaranta Veira, who we had seen earlier, though they're both attractive and well voiced, with Ms. Veira having a slightly more supple soprano voice. But Ms. Green's acting was more convincing; she wore an evil smile and appeared to be calculating her every move. The character of Severin, on the other hand, worked best with less acting. John Nelson was intent on movements that were stagy and stylish, while Aram Tchobanian (seen earlier) played the more perfect model for Sacher-Masoch: a witless chump trained to love beautiful women without any reciprocation. (The real-life Leopold, as a boy, was bound and whipped by a beautiful aunt who wore furs and an evil smile in a ritual perhaps designed to express her twisted hatred of male dominance.)

Mr. Gal seems to have found an eclectic style of music that draws on a variety of forms to suit the occasion. The use of staccato singing, for example, was interesting, and the addition of percussion helped to add a burlesque quality to the score. The singing highlight was Wanda's Scene 4 solo, in which she confesses her boredom with Severin because he is too gentle and unmanly with her, a strong concession of her disgust with playing the cruel woman. Perhaps this was music that was too pretty, but it gave a nice opportunity for the singers to shine.

With just three instrumentalists, pianist Michael Conley, cellist Jessie Marino and percussionist David Schotzko (with Thomas Carlo Bo