

Thursday February 2, 2012

Love From Afar review: Modern opera at its very best

Richard Ouzounian Theatre Critic

Love From Afar

★★★★ (out of 4)

By Kaija Saariaho & Amin Maalouf.
Directed by Daniele Finzi Pasca.
Conducted by Johannes Debus. Until
Feb. 22 at the Four Seasons Centre for
the Performing Arts, 145 Queen St. W.
416-363-8231.

Come to have your eyes dazzled; stay
to have your heart moved.

That is what I guarantee will happen to
you at *Love From Afar*, which the
Canadian Opera Company opened on
Thursday night. There are so many
riches on display in this 2000 opera
from Finnish composer Kaija Saariaho
that one hardly knows where to start.

The score itself is positively thrilling in a
way that manages to be modern and yet
unthreatening at the same time, filled
with long-lined melodies that journey to
unexpected places and complex inner
voices from the orchestra that
constantly surprise.

COC Music Director Johannes Debus has delved into the heart and soul of this work, with his ensemble constantly providing every necessary nuance of Saariaho's music, from its subtlest sigh to its most heart-rending scream.

The story has the opaque charm of a fairy tale, not unlike the plays by the French mystic author, Paul Claudel. It's set in the 12th century and a troubadour from Aquitaine falls in love, from afar with a Countess from Tripoli, with only a mysterious pilgrim to act as a kind of spiritual matchmaker.

There is a dramatic ocean voyage and a dramatic final meeting, but one comes to this work not for the plot, but the thoughts and feelings behind it. *Love From Afar* is really a profound meditation on love and death, as well as the role that what Shakespeare calls "the divinity that shapes our ends" does with it.

Director Daniele Finzi Pasca understands just what is needed and he fills the stage with triple images of each of our three leading players, swirling some through the air, letting others emerge seemingly from the depths of the earth.

The setting of Jean Rabasse is a dazzling maze of arches, lighting fixtures and floating silk that combine to create a unique universe, one which Finzi Pasca and Alexis Bowles have lit with a daring skill.

If I had seen nothing but the stunning Act IV sequence on board the ship headed for Tripoli, where the work of the other designers is joined by eloquent projections from Roberto Vitolani, I would have been able to go home content from the visual splendour, yet emotional depth of it all.

However, there is more than world-class eye candy here and the three leading players make this work transcendent.

Russell Braun is the lovelorn troubadour and no one, truly, can capture the essence of manly pain as well as he does. Add to this the burnished redwood of his voice, capable of the most powerful explosions as well as the gentlest covered notes and you have a work of art.

Erin Wall also brings amazing reserves of emotional depth to the Countess who finds love and death live side by side. And the richness of her vocal instrument, capable of suddenly slashing into searing pain, completes the picture.

Krisztina Szabo tackles the eerie role of The Pilgrim with similar success, going from seemingly detached matchmaking to shatteringly involved guilt as the work evolves and following every step with a breathtaking clarity.

Love From Afar is yet another indication that, when it comes to exploring how deeply original the art of opera can be, the COC deserves our awestruck thanks.



Krisztina Szabaa (centre) plays the Pilgrim and Russell Braun (above) plays Jaufra© in the Canadian Opera Company's production of *Love From Afar* Thursday night. Set designer was Jean Rabasse, costume designer Kevin Pollard and lighting designers were Daniele Finzi Pasca and Alexis Bowles. Michael Cooper Photo/Michael Cooper Photo