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Rape! Murder! Incest! Suicide!

Philip Glass' 'Enfants Terribles' is staged in Oakland

by Erin Blackwell

Oakland Opera Theater is a small miracle. The last thing you expect to see, or do I mean hear, in a converted warehouse are three concert grand pianos under the mesmerizing baton of Deirdre McClure dishing out hypnotic Phillip Glass. They alone are worth the price of admission to *Les Enfants Terribles*, a 1996 chamber opera based on the same-name 1929 novel by Jean Cocteau.

The fantasia of a brother and sister who ignore the world around them, the better to indulge in perverse Parisian psychodrama, has been transposed by director Tom Dean to French Indo-China, circa 1950. Too bad this attempt at slippery-slope imperial narcissism never delivers a relevant geopolitical pay-off. The Far East barely registers, in fact, except for the occasional silk sheath slit to thigh-level, and a talented multiculti cast.

What does work is the score. Glass is the composer par excellence of ennui, and ennui is exactly what ails these titular bad kids. The vocal lines fight against but cannot transcend the constantly churning, viciously circular pianos. Our two tragic anti-heroes are trapped in a sing-song banality from which they will escape only through death into silence.

Pianists Skye Atman, Paul Caccamo, and Daniel Lockert are in plain view at the foot of the stage, with McClure in an overhead spot that makes her a focal point of restraint, skill, and surgical calm. Behind them, on a raised platform subdivided into too many playing areas, a cast of four singers competes for attention with hard-working members of the Nguyen Dance Company, whose presence is rarely justified dramatically or stylistically.

The one stand-out dance moment is choreographer Danny Nguyen's duet with Nan Busse, as the wild children's mother. No sooner is she onstage than she's accosted, raped, and murdered. Why? By whom? I have no idea. Both dancers, however, are up to the challenge of matching repetitive moves to repetitive music, and advancing a brutal story-line.

The singers battle valiantly, as opera singers too often must, to be allowed to sing. The so-called minimalist score is complex, the pianos resonant, the uncredited set a shallow nightmare of plywood platforms, staircases, and no discernible color scheme, uncertainly lit by Robert Ted Anderson. Sung in colloquial French rendered intelligible by Jo Vincent Parks and Angela Roberts' excellent supertitles, the libretto is mercifully easy to follow. But the only word for the maximalist stage traffic is "snarled."

Doomed duo

As directed by Tom Dean, the disappointingly tame brother-sister dyad of Act I becomes an equally tame ménage à quatre in the second. Paul, a troubled soul, oscillates between passive-aggressive pouting and bursts of dancery abandon. Baritone Axel Van Chee sings and acts with brooding conviction. His slippery

sister Elizabeth (soprano Joohee Choi) flounces around silkily before coming into her conniving own for the blood-curdling dénouement.

What's missing from the evening's entertainment is the anticipated pleasure of doomed eroticism. Brother and sister, too old still to be sharing the same bedroom, indoors all day in their pajamas, fail to exhibit any creepy fascination for each other or their much-vaunted armoire full of morbid treasures. The well-matched Chee and Choi are eminently capable of such attractively repellent obsessions, but the director fails to frame the emotional action for them.

When doom does hit, it's swift and sure. In order to maintain her incestuous hold on Paul, Elisabeth wrecks his incipient romance with Agathe (Cary Ann Rosko) by marrying her off to Gerard (Ben Johns). This thrilling Jacobean twist, ending in double suicide, thoroughly justifies the operatic treatment. Lacking an inexorable emotional build, however, the tragic climax comes as an abrupt if welcome surprise.

The main mystery of the evening is the Narrator as performed by Larry Rekow, a dour guy in a suit sitting at a table upstage center. Barked into a mike, his prosaic comments stop forward momentum while dispelling the repetitive reverie of three sublimely synchronized keyboards. As an alienation device, he works too well.

Through October 22, Oakland Metro Opera House, 201 Broadway, Oakland. Info: www.oaklandopera.org, (510) 763-1146.

Erin Blackwell conducts a monthly 10-Minute Play Clinic in San Francisco.

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