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### Suffer the Children

Oakland Opera Theater expands its repertoire with *Les Enfants Terribles* by Philip Glass.  
By Sam Hurwitt

As a small company that performs only 20th- and 21st-century works, Oakland Opera Theater knows its way around Philip Glass. It had great success with a 2004 production of his *Akhmaten* and followed that with a production last year of *La Belle et la Bête*, a staged version of the composer's operatic accompaniment to the Jean Cocteau film. Now Oakland Opera is taking on *Les Enfants Terribles*, the third of Glass' trilogy of operas based on Cocteau's works.

The 1995 opera is based on Cocteau's 1929 novel. So rather than closely following the filmmaker's own language of images, it creates its own in being a dance opera, which seems to be much like a regular opera only with more dancing and surprisingly little singing.

Soprano Joohee Choi plays young orphan Elisabeth, baritone Axel Van Chee her brother Paul, and tenor Ben Johns alternates with Jonathan Smucker as childhood friend Gerard, who has the hots for Lise. Mezzo-soprano Cary Ann Rosko portrays both schoolyard bully Dargelos and Elisabeth's dressmaker's-model co-worker Agathe, whose resemblance to Dargelos is a plot point, insofar as the plot can be discerned.

*Les Enfants* is a fever dream of a tragedy involving a disturbingly close brother and sister wrapped up in their own abstract world of hidden treasures and cruel little games. As they grow up, they draw others into their circle, who fall for them but can't penetrate their private language, and are reduced to the role of anguished hangers-on as the siblings languish in self-destructive solipsism.

The story is told mostly through dance, which is interesting here because the original choreography has been replaced by that of Danny Nguyen, who performs in the piece along with his Nguyen Dance Company. Artistic director Tom Dean has taken the story out of Paris and set it in Saigon in the early 1950s without noticeable effect.

Among the rewards of repeat visits to Oakland Opera Theater is seeing how the plain black-box space of the Oakland Metro Operahouse is transformed from production to production, with the stage built somewhere different each time. This time, it rises in stacked platforms directly over the bar. The minimal set by Garrett Lowe is bare-bones in the sense that its skeleton seems to poke out from beneath the skin.

As befits a downtown opera house and part-time rock club that shares a side courtyard with a porn shop, the theater emits a scrappy DIY vibe in most elements of production. At a Sunday matinee, the supertitle projector overheated and broke down twice during the first act, so Dean plopped a bag of ice on it during intermission, because that's just how Oakland Opera rolls.

Glass' repetitive minimalism is such that sometimes it seems as if *doodly-diddly-doodly-diddly* is his answer to everything. Played on three grand pianos lined up in front of the stage, with music director Deirdre McLure conducting at its edge, his music is uncommonly beautiful here, delicate and caressing, which is all the more striking because the action it accompanies is cruel and sometimes sickening. The death of the siblings' clownishly drunken mother takes place in a prolonged rape ballet over a particularly soft and tender stretch of music. Almost as disturbing is a scene of newly orphaned Paul and Lise wrassling backlit in the bath, while their good friend Gerard peeps in on them from the stairs.

One problem with the dance telling the story is that it straddles the line between overly stylized and confusing, and overly literal and not much like dance. The opening of children playing is sheer crowded confusion of hopscotch, cartwheels, whirling, and altercations, with the capes of school uniforms bunching up around dancers' faces. There's also such a blur of motion around the ending that it's more open to interpretation than perhaps intended. The stylized motions of a head-clutching conga line of mourning are haunting, but it's distracting to watch the dancers get in traffic jams at the corners of the stage.

The dancers do replace and supplement the singers with elegant fluidity, and much of the disturbing incestuous subtext comes out in their lingering pas de deux. But it's really the singers who bring the characters to life, particularly Choi as the increasingly spiteful and capricious Elisabeth, who requires little more than a haughty smirk to convey that things are not going to go well for anyone from here on out. The brooding intensity Van Chee brings to Paul comes off as childish pouting appropriate to the titular children's stunted private world, accentuated by the fact that he bows his head when he sings. Johns and Rosko are mostly there to be bewildered and downcast by the duo around which they orbit, and do so sympathetically.

### Details

#### Who / What:

Les Enfants Terribles

#### Details:

Written by Jean Cocteau;  
Composed by Philip Glass; At the Oakland Opera Theater through October 22  
510-763-1146 or [OaklandOpera.org](http://OaklandOpera.org)

Larry Rekow provides occasional narration in English in the style of an old-time broadcast announcer, complete with a slightly tinny-sounding antique microphone. His deadpan, just-the-facts delivery is all the more laudable given the surreality of the material.