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Oakland Opera Theater takes on 'Les Enfants Terribles'

Column by Cheryl North
Inside Bay Area

SOMETIMES the biggest risks are taken by the smallest organizations. The adventurous Oakland Opera Theater provides a case in point. This modestly sized enterprise has performed some of the most unusual, and unusually successful, Bay Area operatic productions in recent years.

The company's next undertaking is Philip Glass' rarely performed dance opera "Les Enfants Terribles." The show opens at 8 p.m. Oct. 6 and continues at 8 p.m. Oct. 7, 12, 13, 14, 19, 20 and 21, and 2 p.m. Oct. 8, 15 and 22. The venue is the audience-friendly Oakland Metro Opera House, 201 Broadway (at the corner of Second Street) one block from Jack London Square.

The OOT appears to be on a roll. Its mission is to make opera more accessible to all ages and cultures and to concentrate on works composed during the 20th and 21st centuries. Among its successes are the 2001 production of Gertrude Stein's "Four Saints in Three Acts"; 2004's production of Glass' "Akhtaten," critically acclaimed as "one of the musical highlights of the year" and last June's presentation of Anthony Davis' opera, "Malcolm X," which played to sell-out audiences.

The 3,000-square-foot performance space, which has been both a warehouse and a Greek restaurant, is appealing in itself. It has 22-foot ceilings and 16-foot windows on three sides, making it a dramatic location for intimately-sized events. It is equipped with a full theatrical lighting system, state of the art sound reinforcement — and a full bar.

The company was founded in 1989 under the leadership of Tom Dean, a Palo Alto native who has lived, studied and worked in the East Bay since 1976. A multi-faceted chap, he studied music at UC Berkeley, played bass and keyboards in rock bands, composes operas and works as OOT's artistic director.

In 1989, an organization called Oakland Opera already was in existence, so Dean's initial effort was named the Underworld Opera Company. In 1991, after the earlier Oakland Opera went dark, Underworld adopted the name Oakland Opera Theater.

"Les Enfants Terribles" is based on the fascinating fantasy novel concocted by the great French artist/writer Jean Cocteau in the 1920s. The novel takes the form of a narration by someone named Gerard who tells the story of an other-worldly pair of siblings, Paul and Lise, who live in a make-believe world of their own imaginings.

According to OOT production manager Mia Steadman, Paul and Lise "are severed from the outside world; isolated and totally dependent on each other. They pass their days acting out wild fantasies, at first innocent, then increasingly perverse."

While Cocteau is not particularly familiar to present-day audiences, his was one of the most famous names in the cultural milieu of the 1920s, '30s and '40s. Now he is considered one of the most multi-talented artists of the 20th century — a novelist, playwright, director, poet, essayist, set designer and actor. Although he was active in a number of avant-garde art movements, he always retained his own particular outlook and went on to become one of the most important and creative film directors of his age.

Dean, also a man of fertile imagination, has reset "Les Enfants" into 1954 French Indochina so that it serves as an apt commentary on the self-reflective nature of the French colonialism there. As such, the piece can relate to the nature of similar situations in present times.

He has assembled an appealing cast led by soprano Joohee Choi as Lise. Choi has just completed a two-year residence with the Los Angeles Opera and has been praised for her performances as Sophie in "Der Rosenkavalier," Alice in "Falstaff" and Juliette in "Romeo et Juliette." On Broadway, she played Tuptim in "The King and I," and was nominated for a Tony Award. She received the Theater World Award for Best Debut Actress for the role.

Baritone Axel Van Chee sings the role of Paul. Van Chee, last seen locally as Captain Valentine in OOT's "Johnny Johnson," recently was praised in Opera News for his "resonant baritone" and "striking stage presence."

The dance aspects of the presentation are provided by Oakland-based Nguyen Dance Company, a multicultural performance troupe. Founded in 1999, Nguyen, under the direction of its founder Danny Nguyen, blends traditional and contemporary Vietnamese dance forms.

Am I forgetting something? Oh yes — opera is mainly about music. So what of the composer?

Well, the music of Phillip Glass used to make me fidget and grind my teeth because of its seemingly ad infinitum repetitions of a single

phrase or motif. I avoided sitting through any concert that listed his name on the program.

Then I saw the recent movie "The Illusionist." I was so overwhelmed with the beauty of its musical score that I sat in the theater an extra five to seven minutes until the credits were completed. This gorgeous score, without which the movie would lose much of its fascinating character, was by Phillip Glass!

I am now one of his more serious fans.

Tickets for "Les Enfants Terribles" are \$32-\$36. Call (510) 763-1146 or visit www.oaklandopera.org.