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Review of Lyric Opera Production of Show Boat

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first act, and through the second act suggested her growing maturity. Maria frequently changes clothes as she progresses, and other characters regularly judge her based on her clothing. While the resulting fashion parade reinforces her development, in this production, it drew attention to the new identities being assumed across Austria at the time. Brown-shirts and Nazi uniforms mixed with nun's habits, dirndls, and play clothes made of curtains. Liesl exclaims "We're all Austrian," but what quite *being Austrian* means fluctuated throughout *The Sound of Music*. The characters' performances of Austrian identities were magnified in this production by the inclusion of newsreel footage, projected swastikas, and violent political scenes, documenting the fact that the Austrian identity was vulnerable and ultimately compromised by the Nazis. Promoted as a homecoming for the musical, this production's power was very much the result of Gergen and Struppeck's Salzburg reading.

Hannover's *Lady in the Dark* indicated just how relevant seemingly dated musicals can be when they are allowed to be reinterpreted and set in the present day, while *The Sound of Music*'s "return" to Salzburg achieves a local impact with a universal musical. Together, these German-language revivals of classic American musicals indicate the potential for powerful new productions, if the practice of revivals can be approached more innovatively than it has been of late on Broadway. While these productions represent cultural exchanges, a transatlantic educational exchange may have a great deal to offer Broadway. Singing "Do Re Mi" in German seems a very good place to start.

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SHOW BOAT. Music by Jerome Kern. Book and lyrics by Oscar Hammerstein II, based on the novel by Edna Ferber. Directed by Francesca Zambello. Lyric Opera of Chicago, Civic Opera House, Chicago. 12 February 2012.

The premiere effort of the Renée Fleming Initiative brought Jerome Kern and Oscar Hammerstein's masterpiece *Show Boat* to the Lyric Opera stage, demonstrating an annual commitment to producing works of the American musical theatre. As Lyric's general director Anthony Freud asserted in an open letter to patrons, "great works of musical theatre profit enormously from the resources of a major opera company." While Francesca Zambello's lavish production may have affirmed that statement within



Act 1 finale, the ensemble in *Show Boat*. (Photo: Robert Kusel.)

the context of the opera house, little attention was paid to the elements that make American musical theatre generically different from opera, most notably book scenes with storytelling and narrative expressed through realistic spoken dialogue. Such scenes often require a style of acting that conveys relationship and emotional content through nuance and subtlety, rather than through size and scale. Some elements of Zambello's production served the scope and scale of the musical very well, while others robbed it of a sense of realism or fluidity. Indeed, the Lyric production conjured ghosts from what one might imagine to be the original Ziegfeld production of 1927, evident in static stage pictures of massive ensembles framed by elaborate scenography. The Lyric production may have revived the work and injected it with fresh color and sound, but it neither reinvented it nor provided any new illumination to the eighty-five-year-old piece. If this is to be an ongoing tradition, the Lyric will need to find a way to adequately address those generic differences between opera and musical theatre, especially if it intends to produce more contemporary works.

Show Boat has long been viewed as a transitional bridge between eras of musical theatre. On one level, it represents a shift from musical comedy to musical drama, which structurally integrated book and music and often addressed more serious themes; on another level, the musical represents a stylistic turning point between operetta and more popularly influenced musical vernaculars of vaudeville, jazz, and 1920s pop. Far more serious than other musical comedies of the era, *Show Boat* touches on issues like racial injustice, compulsive gambling, and miscegenation. The score includes soaring melodies, such as "Ol' Man River," "You Are Love," and "Make Believe," as well as blues and Tin Pan Alley-influenced songs like "Can't Help Lovin' Dat Man" and "Bill." With five Broadway revivals (1932, 1946, 1966, 1983, and 1994) and three film versions (1929,



The ensemble in *Show Boat*. (Photo: Robert Kusel.)

1936, and 1951), *Show Boat's* place in the canon of American musical theatre is unrivaled. With such historical significance, as well as its roots in operetta, it seemed a fitting choice for the Lyric Opera's first foray into this most American art form, but the revival resulted in a slightly awkward hybrid, more successful as a concert than a musical production.

The principals' performances were consistently beautifully sung. Rarely do audiences see musicals with casts made up of twenty-nine principals and dancers and supported by two distinct choruses and a full orchestra. This immense ensemble suitably filled the 3,500-seat Civic Opera House without the artificial amplification to which musical theatre audiences have become accustomed; but lyrics were often muddy because of this, forcing audiences to rely on projected supertitles of awkwardly phrased American idioms and Hammerstein's phonetically rendered dialects. Spoken lines, which were artificially amplified in order to be heard over the lush orchestrations, were still often shouted by the principals, even when the text required intimacy. Expository scenes became clumsy and obvious as a result of this, coupled with static staging. Love scenes between Nathan Gunn (Ravenal) and Ashley Brown (Magnolia) that should have reflected tenderness and fragility, instead appeared coarse and stiff. Both actors were far more successful at han-

dling lovemaking through song ("You Are Love" and "Make Believe"). Comedic book scenes fared considerably better, thanks to highly skilled physical performances by Ross Lehman (Cap'n Andy), Cindy Gold (Parthy), Bernie Yvon (Frank), and Erica Mack (Ellie), all of whom offered animated and fluid performances of scenes that required more virtuosity than subtlety and nuance. One moment of unintentional irony occurred in the melodrama within the play, "The Parson's Bride." The exaggerated gestures and inflated line readings intended to show Delsarte influences (actress Gold was credited as a Delsarte consultant), instead appeared and sounded like most other book scenes in the musical.

Show Boat requires the presence of two distinct choruses, one African American and the other Caucasian. Because of the large cast size, most full chorus numbers resulted in static stage pictures, with most choreographed movement of the chorus limited to parade-like entrances and exits. There were twelve designated dancers, whose excellent choreography by Michele Lynch reflected both period and social status, but their presence was relegated to specific dance breaks in the music, resulting in an episodic, disjointed feel in most large numbers. The one exception to the "stand and deliver"-style staging occurred late in the performance, during the

number "Hey, Feller" (beautifully sung by Angela Renee Simpson as Queenie) and danced by both the African American dancers and chorus. At that moment, the entire stage was animated and alive in a way it had not been before. Principals, chorus, and dancers all were infected with Charleston-influenced rhythmical movement that pulsed in stark contrast to earlier numbers, in which chorus members simply promenaded laboriously in tempo with the music.

Ultimately, the Lyric Opera of Chicago's production of *Show Boat* could be considered a success if the goal was to produce the classic American musical utilizing the conventions of opera staging. Per Anthony Freud's assertion, Zambello's production did profit from the resources of a major opera company. It served the audience's ear by casting such international vocal talents as Gunn, Simpson, Morris Robinson (Joe), and Alyson Cambridge (Julie), by filling out ensemble numbers with forty-plus chorus members, and by providing a world-class orchestra to play Kern's score. Where it may have fallen short was in the execution of those elements that define the musical theatre form as distinct from that of opera: the integration of realistic spoken dialogue communicated through a style of acting and staging more representational than presentational.

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ULSTER BANK BELFAST FESTIVAL AT QUEENS. Belfast, Northern Ireland, 14–30 October 2011.

In the years immediately following the 1998 Good Friday Agreement (GFA), which ended the Northern Irish Troubles, citizens of the state felt both optimism (that they would now be free of violence) and trepidation (that the peace would not last). This mood has become more ambivalent in recent years. While it seems unlikely that large-scale violence will return, it has also become clear that the GFA did not solve the problems of the state. Distrust lingers between Catholics and Protestants and partisan deadlock has stymied the new devolved government. In addition, the global financial crisis has taken a serious toll on the North, resulting in the loss or reduction of many social services. At the same time, the "Occupy" movement has drawn attention to worldwide imbalances between the wealthy and the poor. Nearly all citizens of Northern Ireland agree that the state is in a significantly better condition than it was during the Troubles, but the initial optimism of the peace process has faded.

Many of the most significant plays at the 2011 Ulster Bank Belfast Festival at Queens (which sold approximately 45,000 tickets for events in music, dance, visual arts, and theatre) expressed this frustration. The discourse surrounding the peace process has emphasized moving forward into a brighter "shared future" (a term frequently deployed by pundits and politicians), but these plays questioned the utility and validity of such progress narratives. Staged by both local and international companies and held in venues around the Belfast city center, these performances replaced the image of the idyllic "shared future" with imperfect and even disastrous visions.

Set in a post-apocalyptic future, in which a genetically engineered virus has eradicated most human and animal life, Paul Kennedy's *Guidelines for a Long and Happy Life* offered the most pessimistic vision of the future. The play's three major scenes, staged in reverse-chronological order, followed six survivors through the aftermath of the disaster. Each character appeared in only one scene, with the exception of The Woman (Katie Richardson), who was in two. Between these scenes, a chorus provided glimpses into the rest of this world; for example, a wordless vision of refugees searching for food. These interludes also featured the titular "Guidelines for a Long and Happy Life"—radio broadcasts offering survival tips, including farming techniques and making friends when meeting other survivors. The characters also referenced the Guidelines; in the first scene, when Ack (John Shayegh) and Bin (Stevie Prickett) met The Woman, they tried to use the broadcasts' advice to befriend her. Her hostile reaction to their overture—she pulled a gun—prompted Bin to shoot and kill her. The next scene showed the reason for her extreme reaction; when she had previously followed the Guidelines, an unnamed man (James Doran) used her trust to rape her (although The Woman was arguably the play's most fully developed character, it is unfortunate that the one female character remained nameless and was primarily identified as a victim of sexual violence). The final scene explained the origins of the broadcasts: two men (friends, possibly lovers) recorded them in an effort to bring some order to the newly decimated world and to come to terms with their own trauma. Colenso (Faolán Morgan) and Pleasance (Andrew Stanford) created the broadcasts out of a sincere desire to offer hope to any other survivors.

Belfast's Tinderbox Theatre Company produced the play in an empty warehouse in East Belfast, where Michael Duke's direction transformed the venue into a frightening wasteland. Duke staged each scene in a different part of the warehouse's open floor, but Ciaran Bagnall's lighting design