

Macbeth stands out in places

MUSIC

MACBETH

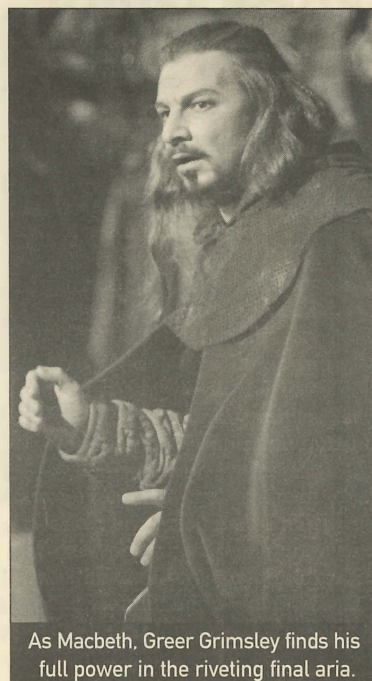
A Vancouver Opera, Edmonton Opera, and Portcouver Opera coproduction. At the Queen Elizabeth Theatre on November 25. Remaining performances on November 30 and December 2

➔ The Vancouver Opera deserves credit for trying to create as much visual as vocal excitement in its shows, for pushing its stagecraft into the 21st century. But Broadway production-design legend Jerome Sirlin's ambitious holographic, multi-screen projections for season opener *Macbeth* amount to layers of high-tech wallpaper briefly enlivened by striking effects. Like the rest of the production, the impression is of long, stagnant sections and short bursts of greatness.

Based on William Shakespeare's sinister classic, *Macbeth* is not as well-known as Verdi's later spins on the Bard, such as *Otello*. It's a psychological piece, demanding a sustained, chilling, highly charged vibe from both its performers and its designers. In the title role, bass-baritone Greer Grimsley cuts a swath, bounding about the stage, tormented by his own ambitions and their murderous outcomes. He's strong in the role, but his final aria takes the show to another level in a riveting outpouring of despair that needs no projections to create atmosphere. As for Lady Macbeth, famed soprano Jane Eaglen can effortlessly manoeuvre the demanding score and resound above the choruses, but her physical acting is too stiff to fully radiate the evil, conniving force of nature that Verdi intended.

Other highlights include the always-dependable chorus's haunting "Patria Oppressa" in the fourth act; the same scene finds tenor John Bellemer, a bit wooden as the betrayed Macduff, suddenly pulling off a sweetly heart-rending ode to his murdered wife and children. Other than maestro John Darlington's orchestra's vibrant performance, the show's second-most consistent strength is Burak Bilgili as Banquo: his early duet with Macbeth finds the Turkish performer's richly rounded voice nicely complementing Grimsley's own stiletto-sharp instrument, and he leads the huge chorus in an emotional surge of horror in reaction to Duncan's murder. The next time we see Bilgili, it won't be in a supporting role.

The only thorough disaster in the mounting is the witches—and unfortunately, they're a big part of the show. From their Cirque du Soleil-style satin costumes to their over-



As Macbeth, Greer Grimsley finds his full power in the riveting final aria.

choreographed hocus-pocus, they kill the work's creepiness instead of creating it. Their antics take away from the focused gloom and intensity of the opera, a fault that must fall in part to director Garnett Bruce.

As for Sirlin's sets, they're not as groundbreaking as anticipated. Much of the time, the long, vertical screens with abstracted patterns simply evoke settings. They work best when they're moving—the atmospheric sight of clouds shifting slowly over a moonlit night on the moors, or the wavering of castle "pillars" as Macbeth starts to hallucinate. The scene containing Banquo's murder shows their true potential: Banquo sings a song of warning to his son beneath a swaying forest of leaves, while his attackers lurk in the darkness behind the long screen "trunks"; when the men descend upon him with their blades, the projected foliage suddenly drops to envelop the throng.

Moments like that are reminders that despite the mixed results, it's still better to see a risky take on a lesser-known opera than a safe take on a well-known one.

> JANET SMITH

HEAR IT NOW 2006

Featuring the NOW Orchestra, with guests Diane Labrosse, John Oswald, and Pierre Tanguay. At the Scotiabank Dance Centre on Friday, November 24

➔ John Oswald doesn't write music so much as design events, and the incident he crafted at the Scotiabank Dance Centre last Friday was exceptionally diverting and exceedingly weird. *Rien Ne Va Plus*, commissioned by Vancouver's NOW

Orchestra, employed a bizarre mix of chance operations, game theory, sampling, and free improvisation to create a celebratory mash-up that honoured the jazz past while simultaneously giving it a good thwacking. It was also both unbearably chaotic and far too short—which is typical of the incongruities that attend this Toronto-based composer, saxophonist, and musical philosopher's work.

For the debut of *Rien Ne Va Plus*, Oswald turned ringleader's duties over to Diane Labrosse, a fellow conceptualist and long-time spark plug of Montreal's *musique actuelle* scene. Rather than manipulate her usual sampler or keyboard, however, Labrosse was given a mixing board, some dice, and a turntable modified to function as a roulette wheel. When she spun the "wheel", the result triggered a pre-recorded sample of an iconic jazz recording. Meanwhile, the musicians use colour-coded betting cards to wager on the outcome of the spin; the winners got to play. To further complicate matters, each musician had been assigned a number, and Labrosse rolled the dice to decide the soloists.

For Oswald, working with chance operations is a way to ensure that performance is different; he aims to undermine the known parameters of both written music and improvisational virtuosity. For the musician, *Rien Ne Va Plus* offered an opportunity to add to—or subvert—a standard recording with only the briefest notice. And for listeners, the initial response was one of vertigo: hearing a drummer and a walking bass when only a handful of horn players were visible performing was incredibly unsettling.

Nervousness turned to giddy hilarity as the work's parameter became more obvious. Hearing the players' split-second responses to snippets of Dizzy Gillespie's "Salt Peanuts" or a clip from Miles Davis's *Bitches Brew* was fascinating, and the unpredictability built into Oswald's structure forced us to focus as intently as they did.

Part blindfold test, part performance art, and part swinging lunacy, *Rien Ne Va Plus* was only one highlight of an evening that also included new compositions from NOW Orchestra artists: director Coat Cooke, guest drummer Pierre Tanguay, and trumpeter John Korsrud, as well as a reworked version of Labrosse's *Animal Tales*. Any one of these could have been the focus of this review; likewise the three small group improvisations that materialized after intermission. Now nearly 2 years old, this most unconventional orchestra is sounding better than ever.

> ALEXANDER VART

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