

The Washington Times

New look at 'Redemption'

By T.L. Ponick
January 22, 2008



Laura Schandelmeier as Clorinda receives last rites from Stephen Clapp (right) as Tancredi in the In Series production of "The Battle Between Tancredi and Clorinda." Their singing alter egos, Ethan Watermeier and Randa Rouweyha, are by her side.

The In Series' current offering, "Combat and Redemption: An Opera Triptych," is superior by an order of magnitude over anything this little company has yet produced.

The highly ambitious program, being performed on the upper stage of the spiffy new Atlas Performing Arts Center in the District, consists of three diverse, rarely heard one-act operas from three countries and three periods — all concerned with the daily battle we call life.

Under the sensitive direction of Allison Arkell Stockman, the company's ensemble of talented singers tackles a variety of roles with conviction and enthusiasm. They're aided and abetted by a small pit orchestra, fancy costuming and a highly adaptable set. The result is a small miracle: professional opera at a modest price.

"Combat and Redemption" features Claudio Monteverdi's 1624 "Il combattimento di Tancredi e Clorinda" (roughly, "The Battle Between Tancredi and Clorinda"); Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart's fluffy "Impresario" (1786); and English composer Gustav Holst's "Savitri," composed in 1908 but first performed in 1916.

"Il combattimento" is the tale of Tancredi, a Christian knight battling "infidels" occupying the Holy Land, who falls in love with Clorinda, a Muslim woman.

Not long after, he defeats a brave Muslim soldier in battle — only to discover that it's Clorinda in disguise. This would have been the perfect tragic solution in Monteverdi's era, but it's a controversial notion in our own times, making this ancient work somehow fresh and new.

Standouts in "Il combattimento" included tenor Peter Burroughs in the substantial role of the Narrator and dancers Stephen Clapp and Laura Schandelmeier, who pantomimed the Kabuki-like swordplay of Tancredi and Clorinda while baritone Ethan Watermeier and soprano Randa Rouweyha tackled the same roles vocally.

Mozart's "Impresario" was penned as a party piece for Emperor Joseph II. It's a "singspiel" (akin to a short Broadway show featuring spoken dialogue) a kind of backstage drama in this case, pitting a pair of battling sopranos against each other for the starring role in an upcoming production.

It's not surprising that dueling divas Kate Vetter Cain and Randa Rouweyha had the most fun in this little opera, which gave them ample opportunity to show off their vocal prowess — and their claws — which they did with great relish.

"Savitri" is a relatively unknown work by Holst, better known for his orchestral suite "The Planets." Rooted in Indian mysticism, "Savitri" pits a devoted wife against Death, who has come to take her husband.

(The opera's novel use of a wordless female chorus looks ahead to "Neptune," the final movement of "The Planets.") The vocal standout here clearly was mezzo Michelle Rice in the title role. Bold and rich, her voice conveyed passion and authority as she battled wits with Death, sung with great solemnity by baritone Bryan Jackson.

Although lacking a bit in bass heft, the orchestra, conducted by Joel Lazar, performed throughout with great sensitivity, rarely overshadowing the singers.

Drawbacks? Without surtitles, the audience was on its own in the Monteverdi, which was sung in Italian. Even dialogue in the remaining operas, both sung in English, was occasionally difficult to catch without the surtitles because of lapses in diction on the part of the singers.

These are mere quibbles. This brave but risky offering of relatively unknown works may very well be the In Series' most fully realized production to date.

WHAT: The In Series program "Combat and Redemption: An Opera Triptych"

WHERE: Atlas Performing Arts Center, 1333 H St. NE

WHEN: Saturday and Sunday at 3 p.m.

TICKETS: \$20 (students), \$36 (seniors) and \$39 (adults)

PHONE: 202/315-1323

WEB: www.inseries.org

MAXIMUM RATING: FOUR STARS