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Exterminating Angel Explores Existentialist Angst on Opera Stage

David Sheward · Sunday, November 19th, 2017

Existentialist angst is not your usual fodder for the opera stage, but Thomas Ades's *The Exterminating Angel*, based on Luis Bunuel's classic 1962 film, explores the terrifying territory of lost identity and purpose. Now at the Metropolitan Opera after a world premiere last year at Salzburg and a production in London, this disturbing work challenges notions of traditional musical staging.

Rod Gilfry, Amanda Echalaz, and Christine Rice in *The Exterminating Angel*.
Credit: Ken Howard/The Metropolitan Opera

The libretto by director Tom Cairns and the composer follows the original screenplay by Bunuel and Luis Alcoriza. The setting is the home of Edmondo and Lucia De Noble where a glitzy dinner party attended by the cream of Mexico City society is about to take place. But the dazzling affair takes a bizarre turn as almost all of the servants flee in terror and after dinner, the guests find themselves unable to leave. Days pass and the formerly elite attendees descend into madness and savagery as food runs out, their tuxedos and ballgowns become rags and bodies turn dirty and smelly. An elderly gentleman expires and a pair of lovers commit suicide in a closet. Finally, the survivors are able to break the spell of confinement but the streets outside are just as full of chaos. The partygoers are a microcosm of upper-crust society, including an opera diva, a conductor, a doctor and a countess. But art, wealth, and titles are no protection when the characters must confront their inner terrors.

Ades' modernist score emphasizes the darkness at the core of Bunuel's vision. Even during the brighter moments when the guests exchange frothy chit chat as they enter, the music stirs and rumbles. There are occasional brief forays into Spanish-influenced, flamenco-like tones, but the prevalent leitmotif is ominous. Within this limited palette, Ades delivers a gripping musical vocabulary of foreboding.

Sophie Bevan and David Portillo in *The Exterminating Angel.*
Credit: Ken Howard/The Metropolitan Opera

Likewise, Cairns' staging manages to maintain tension even though there is no ultimate resolution. Yes, the guests are finally released from their hellish predicament, but there is no relief when they flee to the outside world and there is no explanation for their inertia. The pacing flows smoothly as

Hildegard Bechtler’s stark, sleek set revolves slowly, and the action builds to a harrowing climax of despair as the guests spill into the city and an enormous chorus erupts into further panic.

Soprano Audrey Luna reaches vocal and dramatic heights as the temperamental opera singer. Joseph Kaiser and Amanda Echalaz capture the anxiety and nervous bluster of the hosts. Sophie Bevan and David Portillo as the suicidal lovers infuse an especially intense duet with passion and despair. The rest of the stunning company which includes Alice Coote, Christine Rice, and Sir. John Tomlinson conveys the bleakness of Bunuel’s view of the human condition.

Oct. 26—Nov. 21. Metropolitan Opera, 30 Lincoln Center Plaza, Broadway at 66th St., NYC. Remaining performance: Nov. 21, 7:30pm. Running time: two hours and 30 mins. including intermission. $113—$245. (212) 362-6000. www.metopera.org.

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