

Cultural Daily

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Maestro Hits a Flat Note Dramatically, but Soars Musically

David Sheward · Wednesday, February 6th, 2019

The life of Arturo Toscanini, perhaps the greatest conductor of the 20th century, would make a fascinating drama. In addition to collaborating with all the top names of the music world in his decades-long career, he bravely took a stance against fascism in his native Italy and in Nazi Germany, leaving Europe in the late 1930s to lead the NBC Orchestra and bring the classics into millions of American homes over the radiowaves. Plus a recent discovery of a cache of letters offers a glimpse into his intimate life particularly a long-term affair with the pianist Ada Colleone Mainardi. Unfortunately, *Maestro*, a strange combination of solo show and concert presented by Ensemble for the Romantic Century, is not that work.



John Noble in *Maestro*.

Credit: Shirin Tinati

Playwright Eve Wolf, the company's executive artistic director, stitches together excerpts from the newly-discovered letters with performances of memorable pieces Toscanini conducted from a sterling ensemble of musicians. The framing device is a 1938 rehearsal where the conductor displays his legendary temper at the NBC orchestra (the audience) then recounts how he got to this celebrated position. Actor John Noble bears a striking resemblance to the subject and he does impart some his renowned passion for his music, but we do not see much of the man beyond histrionics and pining for Mainardi who remained in Germany while Hitler was in power. Noble delivers a mostly one-note performance, varying little from angry rants. Wolf's script doesn't tell us much about Toscanini's artistry and Donald T. Saunders' direction is sluggish.

But the real heart of *Maestro* is the glittering professionalism of its musicians, particularly pianist Zhenni Li, who gives brilliant life and fingering to Wagner's *Liebestod* and Gershwin's *Rhapsody in Blue*. The latter also provides a magnificent solo for trumpeter Maximilian Morel, who wrote the special arrangement for this glorious piece evocative of 1930s Manhattan. David Bengali's imaginative projections create striking images to accompany the sublime sounds. Ironically, both the climaxes of the first act and the show itself are marked by musical performances with Noble as the main character off-stage. This tells us the music and not the actor or the script is the center of this show.

Jan. 15—Feb. 9. Ensemble for the Romantic Century at The Duke on 42nd Street, 229 W. 42nd St., NYC. Tue 7:30pm, Wed 2pm & 7:30pm, Thu 7:30pm, Fri 8pm, Sat 2pm & 8pm. Running time: two hours and 10 mins. including intermission. (646) 223-3010. www.dukeon42.org.

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