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Los Angeles Opera's 'Tristan und Isolde' -- A Stunning Production, A Real Winner.

**RICHARD WAGNER
TRISTAN UND ISOLDE
LOS ANGELES OPERA
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By: Carol Jean Delmar
OperaOnline.us

There are very few truly beautiful moments in theater, but at the conclusion of Los Angeles Opera's "Tristan und Isolde," after Tristan dies, he (or his spirit) rises, walks behind his beloved Isolde, wraps his arms around her from behind, and the two become undeniably united as one. It is truly a beautiful moment in theater.

Los Angeles Opera's "Tristan und Isolde," which opened Saturday, Jan. 19 in the Dorothy Chandler Pavilion, is a stunning production in which all of the elements fit together like a jigsaw puzzle: the voices, music, sets, lighting and costumes. Just under

five hours with two intermissions, the evening was a long one, but the wait was well worth it, to hear soprano Linda Watson sing the ethereal “Liebestod” with voluminous, heartfelt sound and even lines, and then to experience that final moment of unification. This was the precursor of good things to come, no doubt: Watson is set to sing Brünnhilde next season as LA Opera embarks on its first “Ring.”

There are many reasons for the success of this production. It was meticulously conceived. First presented in Los Angeles in 1987 with a revival production ten years later and one in San Francisco in 2006, set designer David Hockney personally supervised refurbishing the sets for this production, and they look crisp and fresh as if never used: the deck of Tristan’s ship with colorful, modernistic awnings; King Marke’s castle in a magical forest fantasyland; and Tristan’s gloomy, desolate fortress on a rocky cliff in Brittany. Medieval to the core -- who says that you have to update in order to entice? Creativity is what it’s all about: lines, angles, shapes and color. Sets can be modernized and still remain faithful to the composer’s vision, as can costumes, which, in this production, fit into the framework of the period created. A semitransparent scrim curtain with “‘Tristan und Isolde’ by Richard Wagner” embroidered on it is very effective; the twinkling evening stars glisten and move; and Tristan rests his body on what appears to be a look-alike Santa Claus sleigh. These little touches make the production one of creativity, elegance and good taste.

James Conlon’s mastery as a conductor is always evident. He directed the Los Angeles Opera Orchestra with energy and passion so that the music soared into highest balcony. Although barely visible in the pit, a few glances in his direction revealed a man immersed in his music, yet leading the musicians so that they could be energized as well. Beginning with the “Tristan chord” and the leitmotives of yearning and desire, and later, deliverance by death, the Prelude evoked a sign of the emotional depths beyond tonality to come. The Act 3 music revealed a feeling of desolation, suffering, ecstasy, grief, transformation and peace – all occurring somewhere between reality, shadows, myths and dreams. Richard Wagner created the score, and James Conlon brought the music to life.

Conlon also brings to audiences a thirst for knowledge. In his role as music director of Los Angeles Opera, he writes articles for the company’s performance magazines and delivers opera talks. To thoroughly enjoy the music of “Tristan und Isolde,” the philosophies inherent in the plot must be understood. The depth of the story is mirrored by the depth of the music. “This is pretty heavy stuff,” I heard someone in the audience whisper.

In brief: Tristan murdered Isolde’s fiancé and was wounded himself. He hid his identity because he wanted to be cured by Isolde since she had healing balms at her disposal. When Isolde became aware of Tristan’s deceit, she wanted vengeance, but she couldn’t act upon her desire because of her attraction to him. He later transported her from Ireland to Cornwall to become the wife of his uncle, King Marke. Questioning Tristan’s love for her, Isolde then decided that the two should drink a death potion. But the maid, Brangäne, produced a love potion instead, which left the two lovers in a struggling, yearning state, where each became the other’s forbidden fruit, and only night and then death could

enable their eternal unity.

Influenced by philosopher Arthur Schopenhauer; Gottfried von Strassburg's medieval epic, "Tristan"; the dramatization of the story by Karl Ritter; the scenario of a similar opera written by poet Robert Reinick for Robert Schumann; and the opera, "L'elisir d'amore" by Gaetano Donizetti – Wagner's real reason for composing "Tristan und Isolde," which premiered in 1859, is that he was in love with his friend's wife, Mathilde von Wesendonck, and he composed "Tristan und Isolde" in memory of that unrealized relationship. According to "The Penguin Opera Guide," edited by Amanda Holden in 1996, Wagner wrote Franz Liszt: "Since I have never enjoyed the real happiness of love in my life, I want to erect another monument to this most beautiful of dreams in which love will be properly sated from beginning to end."

The music in the Act 2 love duet was sung expressively by Watson and her Tristan, heldentenor John Treleven. Treleven sang lyrically, although a little wobbly in the first act, with the most security and intense emotional musicianship in Act 3. At times his voice sounded guttural; at others he overcompensated by singing somewhat nasal, although a balance between front and back was evident throughout. Bass Kristinn Sigmundsson was a stately King Marke with dignified tone. Bass-baritone Juha Uusitalo's Kurwenal was vocally rich. Brian Mulligan's Melot was vibrant and alive. And Lioba Braun delivered a well-sung Brangäne, although her presence on stage was somewhat unmemorable.

Los Angeles Opera's production of "Tristan und Isolde" is one of total professionalism. It is a thought-evoking production for the student in all of us.

Conductor, James Conlon
Designer, David Hockney
Director, Thor Steingraber
Lighting Designer, Duane Schuler
Associate Conductor/Chorus Master, Grant Gershon
Concert Master, Stuart Canin
Fight Director, Jonathan Rider
Costumes constructed by Dale Wibben