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The new children's Opera, 'Keepers of the Night' -- How was it? It all depends on your expectations.

Peter Ash

Keepers of the Night

Los Angeles Children's Chorus

July 14, 2007

By Carol Jean Delmar

OperaOnline.us

Classical music critics don't generally write reviews on high school productions. When attending a high school production, one expects to see something amateurish, but that's not the point. The amateurism is nothing to be critical of. The parents want to see their children perform, and the children in the audience want to watch their friends perform. And if one of their friends happens to be outrageously talented, then so be it -- a star is born. But if a star isn't born, at least the young performers have fun; they meet new friends in the process; and by working with a director and conductor, they acquire a discipline that will carry into their everyday lives. But foremost, their appreciation for the

arts grows, and some of them discover that they love opera.

That's what happened at the Alex Theatre in Glendale, California, when the Los Angeles Children's Chorus (LACC) premiered Peter Ash's opera, "Keepers of the Night." The performance on July 14 aroused a cheering audience of parents and friends, but members of the press should not have been invited. They "were" invited though, and so they came. The first review to run was a very thoughtful critique by Mark Swed of the Los Angeles Times. The press came to this production because of the caliber of the professionals involved. Donald Sturrock wrote the libretto, and Peter Ash composed the score.

Ash, who is artistic director of the London Schools Symphony Orchestra, conducted Tobias Picker's "Fantastic Mr. Fox" for Los Angeles Opera in 1998, and Sturrock directed it. Grant Gershon, music director of the Los Angeles Master Chorale and associate conductor-chorus master of LA Opera, conducted this new "Keepers," and the production was directed by Corey Madden, who was the associate artistic director of the Center Theatre Group for 22 years, which is a major component of the Los Angeles Music Center.

The budget for the undertaking was half-a-million dollars. No doubt that was used to pay for some very professional adults, including a few professional opera singers.

But the music, although not displeasing, was unmemorable. The libretto was much more audience friendly and probably could stand on its own as the dialogue for a children's play, although it reminded me of a bride who is given something old, something new, something borrowed and something blue. I could see "A Midsummer Night's Dream," "Peter Pan" and "Hansel and Gretel" in the opera, a moon that looked like the Queen of the Night in Mozart's "The Magic Flute," and a scene that resembled Wagner's final scene in "Die Meistersinger." The owl, Ozalid, was reminiscent of Hans Sachs in "Meistersinger," since both lead song competitions. In "Verachtet mir die Meister nicht," Sachs sings of the need for Germans to remain united as mastersingers to keep German art alive. The owl in "Keepers" praises nature and the old oak tree, and he maintains that only birds, not other less aristocratic creatures, are capable of singing and winning vocal competitions. The issue of democracy comes into play as well as what is prejudicial and what is not.

The Knight children (much like Hansel and Gretel or the Darling children in "Peter Pan") camp out one night in their backyard in Arcadia, California, end up falling asleep, and then have a rendezvous with some birds and animals in the forest. They are turned into a moth, a bat, a firefly and a mosquito by Selene, the moon, who is angry at Ozalid for rejecting her. The result is chaos in the forest during a song competition that nobody wins. Order prevails in the finale when the four Knight children (not Darling children) become human again and wonder if they were having a dream or actually living a reality. Sounds familiar, doesn't it?

The show was produced in a creative way, so the similarities didn't seem to bother. The costumes and sets were adequate. Professional singers Malcolm MacKenzie (Ozalid) and

Suzanna Guzmán (Teri) were role models for their young cast members and were extremely engaging.

“Keepers of the Night” was commissioned “by” the Los Angeles Children’s Chorus “for” the Los Angeles Children’s Chorus. I therefore expected some gorgeous choral sounds, but there were few. About a week ago, I saw a documentary about the LACC on PBS. The chorus sounded like America’s answer to the Vienna Boys’ Choir, only with both genders. None of that was evident in this production. The joy of choral music is hearing the blending of vocal sounds: sopranos with altos, tenors, basses and baritones. Each singer may not be a Plácido Domingo or Renée Fleming, but each has a voice that is capable of blending with others to make a beautiful sound. Therefore, taking some of these children out of the chorus and giving them solo parts may have been a mistake. Likewise, the composer failed to use the children to their best advantage. Many are talented choristers – not soloists, however.

The forté of “Keepers of the Night” was the zest, desire and energy the children exhibited while performing. That energy transferred to the audience and deserves much praise.

This production was for the children, their parents and friends – not for the critics. The creative team behind the scenes did a terrific public relations job that led the press and opera-going public astray so that our expectations could not be realized.

I therefore decided against dissecting the singers, sets, lighting and costumes. For all of the children onstage and off, and for the parents who were in the audience, the show was a resounding success.

LACC Artistic Director/Chorus Mistress, Anne Tomlinson
Conductor, Grant Gershon
Director, Corey Madden
Scenic Designer, Sibyl Wickersheimer
Costume Designer, Robert Prior
Lighting Designer, Lap Chi Chu
Choreographer, Stephen Hues