



OperaOnline.us
Worldwide reviews for a worldwide audience



Denyce Graves, the Dragon in LA Opera's premiere of "Grendel"
(Photo Robert Millard)

Stunning premiere production of Los Angeles Opera's 'Grendel' takes center stage from a score that is not always pleasing to the ear.

**ELLIOT GOLDENTHAL
GREDEL
LOS ANGELES OPERA
JUNE 8, 2006**

By: Carol Jean Delmar
OperaOnline.us

Los Angeles Opera's production of Elliot Goldenthal's "Grendel" finally had its premiere on Thursday night, June 8, after having been postponed 12 days because of a computer breakdown that caused the large pivoting platform central to the set to malfunction. The highlight of the evening was the curtain call at the end of the performance when Goldenthal came out for an onstage bow, preceded by his life partner, Julie Taymor, who

directed and created the show's vision. The audience was elated by the production, although their applause seemed to say: "We're glad that you pulled it off and that nobody was killed in the process." It seemed like the performers had invited their relatives to root for them. It was as if Goldenthal and Taymor had given birth.

"But to what?" I wondered. "Is 'Grendel' an opera or musical?" According to The Concise Oxford Dictionary of Music, "Opera is a drama set to music to be sung with instruments accompanying singers usually in costume. Recitatives or spoken dialogue may separate the numbers, but the essence of opera is that the music is integral and is not incidental, as in a 'musical' or play with music."

According to librettist J.D. McClatchy's program note, Goldenthal had first envisioned "Grendel" as musical theater, but after encouragement from LA Opera's former general director, Peter Hemmings, and conductor Seiji Ozawa, he decided to compose an opera based on the John Gardner novel, "Grendel," about the tyrannical but dejected existential monster in the "Beowulf" legend. The result on Thursday night seemed more like a theatrical extravaganza suited for Broadway than an operatic experience in the Dorothy Chandler Pavilion, because the music did indeed often seem incidental to what was going on onstage.

Taymor, who is known for her creative sensibilities à la "The Lion King," didn't pull any stops with this production either. We were so busy watching the visual effects that the orchestral music and singing seemed secondary. It was as if Goldenthal, known for his award-winning film scores "Frida," "Alien 3" and "Batman and Robin," had created yet another such score which served as an accompaniment to the action, in this case, action which was not on film, but rather, onstage.

Although bass Eric Owens (Grendel) displayed a deep, robust speaking and vocal sound that was somehow reminiscent of James Earl Jones, and Denyce Graves (the Dragon) sang a booming chesty contralto, then a majestic soprano – we were far too busy watching the weird creatures on the stage, the lighting, the puppetry, the projections and the set changes to care. The true star of the opera was the 48-foot-long, 28-foot-high, \$950,000 wall which moved horizontally and vertically and rotated so that one side displayed ice; the other, roots, rust and stones. And as for the ramp in the middle – we always wondered how far up and down it would shift, if it would come to a halt at some inopportune moment and if the performers would be safe.

True, Mozart's "Die Zauberflöte" has a serpent and spoken dialogue, and Wagner's "Ring" has gods, goddesses, giants and Rhinemaidens, but the sublime music always remains prominent. Although "Grendel" is an ambitious endeavor, Goldenthal's opera, when compared to the works of other great composers, simply doesn't make the grade. To his credit, he incorporates a variety of tempos, colorations and styles that at times are reminiscent of Kabuki music, the Big Band era and African tribal sounds. Much of the music is grand and atonal, causing one to wonder how the singers were able to learn their roles. The colorations demanded of the singers are not always pleasing to the ear and far exceed Wagner's vocal concept for Beckmesser. But atonal music is in vogue right now.

What would we do if a Mozart or Verdi surfaced? Would we recognize their talents?

THE PLOT

Not even the story of “Grendel” can compete with the visual effects. It’s a given that the monster’s *raison d’être* is to kill the beings who torment him as they glorify war, victory and heroism. It seems natural that Grendel would seek solace in the poetry of the Blind Harpist, the wisdom of the Dragon, and the beauty of Queen Wealtheow as he searches for the meaning of his actions and expresses his feelings in a long inner monologue, and it is expected that the heroic Beowulf will defeat him and release him from his aloneness and pain.

Alas! The main function of “Grendel’s” music and plot seems to be to enable the vision. But an opera should be more about the music. Do we want to listen to it on a CD? Do we want to hear it broadcast live from the Met? If not, how can it become and remain part of the standard operatic repertoire?

Even the libretto seems to be lacking in originality, for some of the words come directly from the “Beowulf” poem and the Gardner novel. Is all of the language really necessary? The English and Old English are fine, but couldn’t we live without the “bullshits”?

And what about the scene when Grendel expresses his desires to brutalize Queen Wealtheow? “I’ve decided to kill her . . . To kill her slowly, horribly . . . Holding her over the fire, cooking the ugly hole between her legs,” he sings while pretending to break the legs of a doll like a wishbone. We’ve already seen Queen Wealtheow’s simulated sex scene onstage. Do we need to envision her upside down with her legs sprawled apart as well? True, that part comes directly from the novel, but where does it say that the words have to be included in the libretto? I guess it’s an X-rated opera.

But make no mistake. I was fascinated just like everyone else was by the costumes, dancing and vision. “How did they do that?” I wondered over-and-over again. Although what was happening on the stage was sometimes brutal, it was often handled symbolically. The gigantic mask of Grendel that was spattered with blood in the raid scene was very effective. I loved watching Grendel and Queen Wealtheow sailing on the water in a suspended canoe. “And how did those three Dragonettes get up on top of that fabric-covered Slinky?” I wondered. “Doesn’t that misshapen beast look like an Elephant Man? And look at those creatures flying above the stage. I haven’t seen anything like that since ‘Peter Pan.’ Oh, and that flamboyant red costume on Denyce Graves -- I wonder how much that cost.”

Besides Owens and Graves, other standouts included soprano Laura Claycomb, the celestial-sounding Queen Wealtheow who brought a touch of old opera to the modern theatrics onstage, and dancer Desmond Richardson, whose Beowulf changed the work’s genre in the final scene to opera-ballet. Stripped of his armor and prancing around the stage in his undershorts, his attack movements on Grendel were sharp like the blades of a knife, his leaps and extensions, top-rate. And finally, the choral music -- which offered the finest compositional style of the evening -- created a blending of sounds by the chorus

that was at once resonant and inspiring.

So congratulations Julie Taymor, set designer George Tsypin, costume designer Constance Hoffman and lighting designer Donald Holder. You have created a vision that far surpasses the opera's musical elements, and "Grendel" is dependent on that vision. Great works must have the potential for longevity, but without a \$2.8 million production by Taymor and Tsypin, I wonder whether or not this one does.

"Grendel" goes to the Lincoln Center Festival in July.

Composer, Elliot Goldenthal
Librettist, Julie Taymor and J.D. McClatchy
Conductor, Steven Sloane
Director, Julie Taymor
Set Designer, George Tsypin
Costume Designer, Constance Hoffman
Lighting Designer, Donald Holder
Puppet Design, Michael Curry and Julie Taymor
Choreographer, Angelin Preljocaj
Chorus Master, William Vendice



Eric Owens and the Shadow Grendels: Jonathan Hays, Charles Temkey and David Gagnon. (Photo by Robert Millard)