

Fearless Neef Tortures Old Guard, Enchants Kids in Toronto

Jeremy Gerard

Alexander Neef is emptying a packet of sugar into his daughter's open palm during the intermission of "Love From Afar."

The show runs nearly three hours. Even with tumblers, acrobats, shadow-box figures and Flying by Foy, the opera tests the endurance of many a patron older than four-year-old Marnie, who watched, transfixed, her father says.

"One and a half hours of sheer torture," I heard a ticket holder grumble as he beat a hasty retreat at the break.

Neef, the Canadian Opera Company's startlingly self-assured general director, is only 37 years old. But he has enough experience to know that the contemporary repertory is inevitably going to singe the ears of tradition-bound opera buffs.

They were out in force a week earlier, when I'd attended a faultless, if uninspired, production of "Tosca," joining the polite cheering when Adrienne Pieczonka, creamy-voiced in the title role, delivered the goods with "Vissi d'arte."

Neef, however, who has run Canada's largest opera company since June, 2008, has a talent for keeping the peace while programming mixed seasons that keep older subscribers renewing and brings younger audiences into the fold.

Smooth Operator

Soft-spoken, with intense gray-blue eyes and impeccable tailoring, he works the intermission crowd in the donors' lounge, greeting people by name and soliciting their opinions.

He's unyielding in his admiration for Finnish composer Kaija Saariaho's "Love From Afar," an opera in the John Adams mold about a 12th-century French prince who tires of the material world and imagines a perfect lover. A pilgrim finds that woman in Tripoli and, after a long sea journey, brings them together.

To stage this co-production, a consortium that included the English National Opera and Belgium's Vlaamse Opera, hired Cirque du Soleil director Daniele Finzi Pasca, with results that are kinetic and visually enchanting.

All three roles are tough, but the prince is a monumental endurance course, demanding stamina, unerring pitch and committed acting -- all of which baritone Russell Braun manages with fierce commitment.



Alexander Neef, general director of the Canadian Opera Company, at the Four Seasons Centre for the Performing Arts in Toronto.



The Four Seasons Centre for the Performing Arts in Toronto. The Canadian Opera Company built the theater as its permanent home.

City Opera

Neef was also present at the opera's premiere in 2000 at the Salzburg Festival, where he began his career as a protegee of Gerard Mortier. That name will be familiar to New Yorkers.

Mortier was hired to run the New York City Opera (Neef had planned to join him) when the company self-combusted and Mortier abandoned ship before ever assuming his role.

Neef, who grew up in Rosswalden ("little forest of the horses"), a provincial town of 1,800 in southwestern Germany, and listened to opera recordings when his friends were into heavy metal, credits Mortier with raising a generation of young, fearless arts administrators.

"Mortier invented me," he said. "He gave me a job in opera when no one else would have hired someone with my CV. By 30 I had been the casting director in Paris for four years."

Neef said he wasn't even thinking about running a company when, in January, 2008, a headhunter for the Canadian company called.

"I saw myself as an administrator," he recalled. "I said, 'I don't think I'm the person you're looking for.' What first got me interested was the hardware -- the venue."

Lush Sound

Well, yes, the venue. The Canadian Opera Company built and owns its home, the Four Seasons Centre for the Performing Arts, in the heart of downtown.

As hardware goes, it's just about perfect, a relatively intimate 2,071-seat house with a lush, warm sound and excellent sightlines from every seat. The glass-walled public areas offer enticing city views.

Two weeks after taking over the following June, Neef made his first important decision, signing as music director an ambitious young German conductor who was already making guest appearances at the top opera houses.

Johannes Debus had earned the respect of the orchestra players (who can number as many as 100), leading Prokofiev's massive "War and Peace." The quick and successful hire endeared Neef to his board and staff. Debus was in the pit for "Love From Afar."

The company today has 12,300 subscribers and offers a seven-opera season of 60 to 70 performances. The annual budget is \$35 million, including the cost of operating the Four Seasons Centre.



Krisztina Szabo, Erin Wall and Russell Braun in the Canadian Opera Company production of "Love from Afar" in Toronto.



Antoine Marc, Russell Braun, Ted Sikstrom and Annie-Kim Dery in the Canadian Opera Company production of "Love from Afar" in Toronto. The production is conducted by Johannes Debus.

Neef's mandate is to raise the company's international profile. His personal goal has been to avoid "peak performances," making certain that every production is at an equally high level.

"I travel as much as possible," he said, noting that "conductors and directors are easier to find in Europe, while singers are far better trained in America."

Though he's clearly destined for bigger things, Neef might be hard-pressed to better his situation.

Near the theater there are the Frank Gehry-designed Art Gallery of Ontario, the Daniel Libeskind-designed Royal Ontario Museum and restaurants befitting an international finance and cultural hub.

Great Dining

Over two weekends that took place during Winterlicious -- Toronto's version of New York's Restaurant Week -- we had bison at Pangaea and grilled snapper at Far Niente, two of Toronto's best; \$35 for each three-course dinner. Next season, Neef & Co. will see the return of film director Atom Egoyan for a new production of Richard Strauss's "Salome," among other enticing choices.

In the meantime, you have until Feb. 22 to see the remarkable "Love From Afar," a modern masterpiece that has yet to be mounted in New York. If you go, look for Marnie next to her serene dad, following the action from the fifth row of the orchestra.

"Love From Afar" will be performed in repertory with "Tosca" through Feb. 25 at the Four Seasons Centre for the Performing Arts, 145 Queen St. West, Toronto. Information: +1- 416-363-8231; <http://www.coc.ca>.

Please note this article also appears in Bloomberg Business Week.



Adrienne Pieczonka as Tosca with Carlo Ventre and Adrian Kramer in the Canadian Opera Company production of "Tosca" in Toronto. The conductor is Paolo Carignani.



Carlo Ventre as Cavaradossi and Adrienne Pieczonka as Tosca in the Canadian Opera Company production of "Tosca" in Toronto. The opera is directed by Paul Curran with set and costume design by Kevin Knight.