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Redemption songs

The COC's *Dialogues des Carmélites* is a work of sensual beauty, writes **Robert Harris**

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THE GLOBE AND MAIL • FRIDAY, MAY 10, 2013

EDITOR: GABE GONDA • SECTION L

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GLOBE LIFE & ARTS • L5

Arts

OPERA REVIEW

In the end, an act of redemption

Dialogues des Carmélites
Canadian Opera Company
At the Four Seasons Centre
in Toronto on Wednesday

REVIEWED BY
ROBERT HARRIS

Long after they ceased being of interest to anyone else, French musical artists of the mid-20th century were obsessed with issues of Catholic faith. The nature of martyrdom; the relationship of grace to fate; the proper attitude of detachment to overcome worldliness. It's hard to imagine a 21st-century audience being riveted by such discussions. We may have different words for some of the same dilemmas, but traditional faith, as we are advised every day, is losing its ability to focus our minds and imaginations.

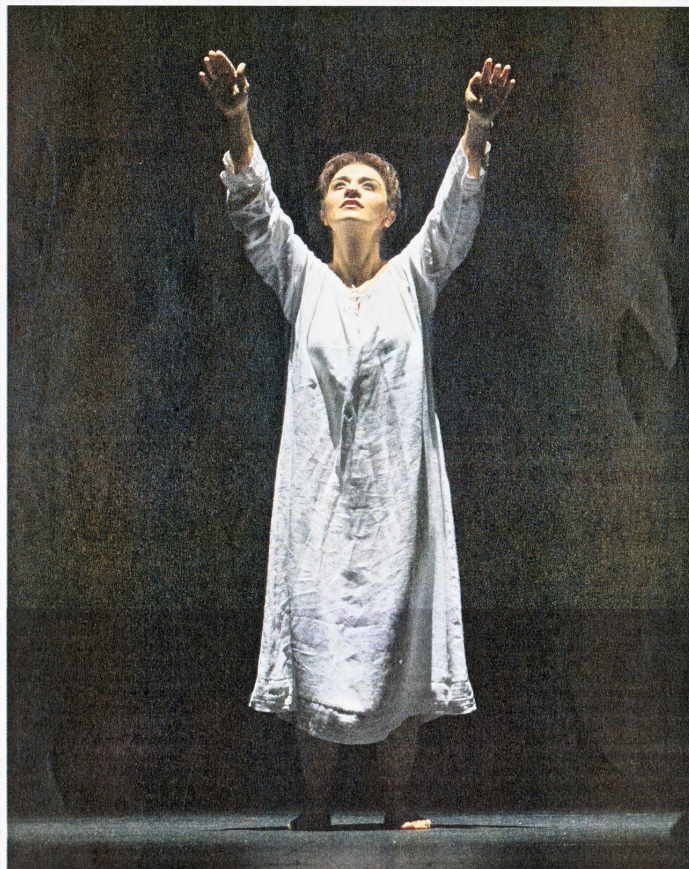
Nonetheless, an opera written in the late 1950s devoted to nothing but these questions has been a staple of the repertoire even since it first appeared.

Francis Poulenc's *Dialogues des Carmélites* is an affecting, subtle examination of issues of faith, with two of the most wrenching scenes in all of opera, and is currently being given a fine production by the Canadian Opera Company.

Part of the appeal has to do with the fact that there are very human stories interwoven into its musical theology. *Dialogues des Carmélites* is based on a real incident, the execution by guillotine of an order of nuns during the French Revolution, and the drama of that inexorable end provides a drumbeat that disturbs and unsettles us throughout the entire production. It is also about the friendship of two novices, Blanche and Constance, who eventually seal their friendship in death. And it is the shocking story of the beloved prioress of the convent who loses her faith and is plunged into agonizing despair in the final moments of her life.

Dialogues des Carmélites is an intense, concentrated work that ultimately succeeds despite its theological complexities.

The key to this success is Poulenc's score, full of the kind of sensual beauty we associate with the best of Maurice Ravel and Claude Debussy. Lush, dra-



Isabel Bayrakdarian, as Blanche in the Canadian Opera Company's production of *Dialogues des Carmélites*, provides some beautiful moments, but a full character is not in evidence. CHRIS HUTCHESON

matic, tuneful, the sheer beauty of the music casts a sheen of humanity on even the most austere scenes.

The members of the COC orchestra, under the direction of Johannes Debus, were really the musical stars of the evening. Every phrase, every dramatic turn of the score was rendered impeccably – a bravura performance.

And the direction, set and lighting design of Robert Carsen, Michael Levine and Jean Kalman created the starkest of physical containment for this claustrophobic piece, with hundreds of revolutionaries swarming the stage at one moment, in silent contemplation the next, framing a virtually non-existent set that forced our attention onto its stark lighting of wide

spaces, including an immense, looming back wall that sat in stony blankness all night, a perfect symbol of abandonment and despair.

If there was a disappointment with the COC production, it was with some of the singers. *Dialogues des Carmélites* is a strange opera, with no real arias – basically an opera of recitative, of dialogues. Drama is at a minimum, with the exception of the final scene and the last part of Act 1, the prioress's death. And in that death scene, Judith Forst was magnificent, evoking the horror of the woman of God who loses her nerve and faith at the very end with powerful passion.

However, few of the other characters were drawn with as much force and clarity. There were fine individual moments from Frédéric Antoun, as Blanche's brother, Hélène Guilmette, playing a charming, saucy, winning Sister Constance, Irina Mishura as Mother Marie and Adrienne Pieczonka, providing a lot of power with her Madame Lidoine, but complete characterizations were lacking.

Partly it is the fault of the opera itself, which often sacrifices characterization to theological discourse, but I thought more was needed to make the piece as deep as it might be. This was especially true of Isabel Bayrakdarian's Sister Blanche, basically the heroine of the piece. Poulenc and his librettist did no favours for the soprano singing Blanche, creating a character full of fear that pulls energy from everyone else in the opera, rather than providing it herself. And although Bayrakdarian provided some beautiful moments, a full character was not in evidence.

Nonetheless, this production of *Dialogues des Carmélites* was powerful and sobering. That final scene, with the nuns singing a prayer as, one by one, they fall to the blade of the guillotine (with the swooshing of the blade written into the score), is so wrenching and so beautiful that many of the opera's other faults are redeemed by its intensity and power. We leave the theatre silenced by great art.

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