

Opera review: Carsen's production of *Dialogues* is nun too shabby

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Irina Mishura (back to camera) as Mother Marie and Judith Forst as Madame de Croissy in the Canadian Opera Company's production of *Dialogues des Carmélites*. Photo by Michael Cooper

Dialogues des Carmélites, as the title implies, is about an order of nuns and their personal (and interpersonal) reflections. What makes Francis Poulenc's opera a drama is the context of the talking: the French Revolution, or, as the director Robert Carsen proposes in the version now on offer at the Four Seasons Centre, the universe.

The set is dark and minimal even by COC standards. We have a chair for the Marquis de la Force, a bed for the Old Prioress, a few cooking fires for the populace, some scattered sticks of furniture to suggest a ransacked convent. The nuns wear habits, and the nobles are in Bourbon garb. Carsen understands that the best way of making this piece seem valid for all time is not to mess with its particulars.

A huge cohort of 101 extras and 44 choristers form a human set, sometimes encircling a scene, sometimes moving as a solemn procession, sometimes absent. One could not ask for a simpler metaphor for the human context of life, however secluded an individual chooses to make it.

In such a simple setting the few bolts of colour — such as an array of flowers standing in for the shrouded body of the aforementioned prioress — must be carefully deployed. They are. Entrances, exits and exchanges are exactly coordinated with the music. Touches of symbolism are unusually deft, as when the Carmelites, their faces veiled, form a wall in Act 2 when Blanche's brother pleads with her to flee the threatened order.

Performances, of course, fill in much of the void. Isabel Bayrakdarian, in pungent voice, was effective enough as Blanche, the young noblewoman who flees her fears instead of facing them. The strongest straight-up soprano singing came from her fellow Canadian Adrienne Pieczonka as the New Prioress. Mezzo-soprano Irina Mishura was rich-toned and convincing as Mother Marie, and soprano Hélène Guilmette was suitably sparkling as Sister Constance. Supporting roles, male and female, were decently done. Tenor Michael Colvin as the Chaplain was notable for his clear diction.

The biggest ovation was for mezzo-soprano Judith Forst as the Old Prioress, world-weary in her interview with Blanche and blasphemous in her death throes. In robust voice at 69, Forst made a powerful thing of this famous interlude, journeying farther from the deathbed than most divas and even requiring restraint.

If there is one scene that exceeds the death of the Old Prioress in emotional force, it is the finale, in which the Carmelites walk to the guillotine, defiantly singing the Salve Regina. Carsen has turned this into an abstract ballet of self-destruction. Whether the tactic enhances or dilutes the pathos of a very real and public execution is debatable, but it is true to the universalist ethos of the show.

One related question the production raises is whether self-sacrifice, noble in spirit, is, in practice, futile. The nuns cross themselves often enough and strike cruciform poses, but there is no cross or other sign of the Almighty to be seen on Carsen's agnostic stage. These believers are acting strictly out of personal conviction.

Poulenc's devotional music — quite tonal, as he conceded, for 1957 — is less equivocal on this point, and after an hour or so of opening-night stiffness, the COC Orchestra moved fluidly under the baton of Johannes Debus. There are fascinating colours in this warm and compelling score. Woodwinds in particular did them justice.

Dialogues des Carmélites repeats on May 11, 14, 17, 19, 21, 23 and 25.