

TORONTO STAR FRIDAY, MAY 10, 2013 SECTION E

ON ONO

STAGE SISTERS

Female leads do the heavy lifting in *Dialogues des Carmélites*, E6



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» ENTERTAINMENT

REVIEW

A hymn to the power of sisterhood

Dialogues des Carmélites

★★★★ (out of 4)

By Francis Poulenc. Directed by Robert Carsen. Until May 25 at the Four Seasons Centre for the Performing Arts, 145 Queen St. W. 416-363-8231.

RICHARD OUZOUNIAN
THEATRE CRITIC

An audience that sat in enthralled silence and then exploded into rapturous applause was the perfect response to Robert Carsen's splendid production of *Dialogues des Carmélites*, which opened Wednesday night for the Canadian Opera Company.

Francis Poulenc's 1957 opera is based on the true story of how 16 nuns from a Carmelite convent in France were guillotined in 1794 at the height of revolutionary frenzy, when organized religion fell under suspicion as surely as any member of the nobility.

It is a strange piece in many ways, devoid of the romance or melodrama that many contemporary operas pin their hats on. This is, when all is said and done, an exploration of one's relationship with God and with death, showing us how the two can intertwine in the most complex way.

The central character is a young noblewoman, Blanche, who flees the secular life for the convent, thinking she will find peace from the violence of the world there, only to be told that the sisters inside have to live with more inner strength than the men in the world outside.

The aging Prioress dies in physical and spiritual agony, upsetting the whole ecology of the convent and forcing everyone to question their beliefs. Next, the revolution taps on the door, then kicks it in and, before too long, the religious women are fighting for their very existence.

There is wonderful psychological



MICHAEL COOPER PHOTO

Adrienne Pieczonka, centre, as Madame Lidoine in the Canadian Opera Company's 2013 production of *Dialogues des Carmélites*.

complexity here and the piece is also a hymn to the power of sisterhood and the strength of female solidarity. How rare it is in an opera to have the women's voices do all the heavy lifting, while the men appear mostly on the sidelines, delivering news.

One exception is Blanche's brother, played with a ringing tenor and a commanding manner by Frédéric Antoun, who plays his duet scene opposite his sister, the always amazing Isabel Bayrakdarian, with such subtle power that the two of them appear in perfect contrast.

Canadian opera icon Judith Forst is emotionally shattering as the Pri-

oress who dies doubting everything she has spent her life defending. Her place in the circle of spiritual life is filled beautifully by Adrienne Pieczonka, who tries to lead the sisters toward a positive destination, using her sublimely healing voice as her major weapon. All of the rest of the large cast sing with passion and act with equal gravitas.

Johannes Debus conducted with a firm grasp of the quicksilver changes in Poulenc's style, which can encompass plangent discord, melodious hymns and percussive military threat, all in the course of a single scene.

But the major hero of the evening

is Robert Carsen, who once again proves he is a master at bringing issues of spirituality onto the stage and making them real and gripping.

From the opening moments, when a giant crowd of revolutionaries advance on us and then part to reveal two noblemen, four footmen and a single chair, we know we're in the hands of a master.

And the final scene, as the Carmelites head toward their fatal final assignment with Madame La Guillotine, can be milked for the crudest melodrama, but Carsen here gives it an astonishing power with an artful staging device I won't reveal.

Michael Levine's sparsely power-

ful set, Falk Bauer's ritualistic costumes and the striking lighting of Jean Kalman, recreated here by Cor van den Brink, are all examples of the kind of art that can be created when someone like Carsen is at the helm.

Dialogues des Carmélites can seem cold and disjointed in places on its journey. In the end, one must admit it is an opera that is easier to admire than to love, but there is truly much to admire here.

The COC has done it again and with an array of stunning leading performances that truly put the "Canadian" in the organization's name.