




OPERA REVIEWS

Ileana Montalbetti (centre, in green skirt) is a sympathetic Ellen in superb Peter Grimes.

Great Grimes

PETER GRIMES by Benjamin Britten (Canadian Opera Company). At the Four Seasons Centre (145 Queen West). Runs to October 26. \$12-\$365. 416-363-8231. See Continuing, page 73. Rating: **NNNNN**

Benjamin Britten was never better than when he was writing about outsiders, and in **Peter Grimes** he created his richest character.

A solitary fisherman in an English coastal village whose residents bond because of their shared way of life, Grimes (**Anthony Dean Griffey**, subbing opening night for an indisposed **Ben Heppner**) has had one young apprentice die in his care. When he secures another from the workhouse, everyone anticipates a bad ending. The only ones who defend him are Ellen Orford (**Ileana Montalbetti**), with whom he's romantically involved, and Balstrode (**Alan Held**), a retired seaman.

Just as important as the individual characters is the town itself, the Borough, and the COC chorus, singing expertly as always under chorus master **Sandra Horst**, becomes as vital to the action as the unpredictable sea that figures prominently in Britten's rich orchestrations.

It's not a stretch for director **Neil Armfield** to set the action in the Borough's social hall, the community's shared "home," and have it stand for courtroom, tavern, seaside and, in a thrilling theatrical moment conjured up by designer **Ralph Myers**, Grimes's lonely hut.

Griffey's Grimes expertly goes from childlike to menacing in an instant, his madness and isolation increasing from one scene to the next as he sings in a voice that rings with full-voiced anger or drops to a whisper to express the fisherman's dreams. You won't easily forget his last heartbreaking scene, mainly a cappella, with counterpoint from the offstage cries of the angry Borough and the occasional solo brass

note in the pit suggesting a haunting foghorn.

Montalbetti makes a sympathetic Ellen desperately trying to care for both Grimes and the new, pitiable apprentice (**Jakob Janutka**) in a society where both are doomed. The always reliable Held has just the right blend of gruffness toward the Borough and concern for the troubled Grimes.

Each of the characters, in fact, is nicely individualized, including tavern keeper Auntie (**Jill Grove**), her two flirtatious "nieces" (**Claire de Sévigné** and **Danielle MacMillan**), Methodist fisherman Bob Boles (**Roger Honeywell**), lawyer Swallow (**Tom Corbeil**), who's not as strait-laced as he initially seems, and comic busybody and snob Mrs. Sedley (**Judith Christin**).

Conductor **Johannes Debus** draws thrilling sounds from the COC orchestra, especially in the interludes and preludes that depict the moods of the implacable, indifferent sea that is a defining force in this harsh world.

JON KAPLAN

Please note: The online version of this article is slightly longer than the print version (see below)

Peter Grimes: Benjamin Britten's tale of a troubled outsider gets a superb production by the Canadian Opera Company

Jon Kaplan



Benjamin Britten was never better than when he was writing about outsiders, and in *Peter Grimes* he created his richest character.

A solitary fisherman in an English coastal village whose residents bond because of their shared way of life, Grimes (Anthony Dean Griffey, subbing opening night for an indisposed Ben Heppner) has had one young apprentice die in his care. When he secures another from the workhouse, everyone anticipates a bad ending. The only ones who defend him are Ellen Orford (Ileana Montalbetti), with whom he's romantically involved, and Balstrode (Alan Held), a retired seaman.

Just as important as the individual characters is the town itself, the Borough, and the COC chorus, singing expertly as always under chorus master Sandra Horst, becomes as vital to the action as the unpredictable sea that figures prominently in Britten's rich orchestration. The production's first image, in fact, is a stage curtain painted with a hazy, Turner-like sea sketch.

It's not a stretch for director Neil Armfield to set the action in the Borough's social hall, the community's shared "home," and have it stand for courtroom, tavern, seaside and, in a thrilling theatrical moment conjured up by designer Ralph Myers, Grimes's lonely hut.

Britten knows how to score with psychological insight, so that the twittering of birds could also be the distracted buzzing in the title character's head. An early round, a sea chantey that calms a tense moment, later becomes a fearsome choral piece when the Borough forms a vigilante mob hunting the beset outcast.

Griffey's Grimes expertly goes from childlike to menacing in an instant, his madness and isolation increasing from one scene to the next as he sings in a voice that rings with full-voiced anger or drops to a whisper to express the fisherman's dreams. You won't easily forget his last heartbreaking scene, mainly a cappella, with counterpoint from the offstage cries of the angry Borough and the occasional solo brass note in the pit suggesting a haunting foghorn.

Montalbetti makes a sympathetic Ellen desperately trying to care for both Grimes and the new, pitiable apprentice (Jakob Janutka) in a society where both are doomed. Her last-act meditation on embroidery is one of the evening's most poignant scenes. Playing opposite her, the always reliable Held has just the right blend of gruffness and concern for the troubled Grimes.

Each of the characters, in fact, is nicely individualized, including tavern keeper Auntie (Jill Grove), her two flirtatious "nieces" (Claire de Sévigné and Danielle MacMillan), Methodist Bible-thumper Bob Boles (Roger Honeywell), lawyer Swallow (Tom Corbeil), who's not as strait-laced as he initially seems, and comic busybody and snob Mrs. Sedley (Judith Christin).

Even better, they all sing the English libretto so clearly that you rarely need the surtitles to understand what the characters are saying. What's sung, in fact, is closer to speech than aria, and the clearness of the words makes the score's spoken quality even stronger.

The director also enlarges the part of a character barely mentioned in the opera, Dr. Crabbe (Thomas Hauff), who here is George Crabbe, the author of the poem on which the opera is based. Crabbe is a silent figure throughout, setting up the action, watching and assessing it. Only seen and acknowledged by children, heavy drinkers and the off-centre Grimes, he's arguably a ghostly presence.

Conductor Johannes Debus draws thrilling sounds from the COC orchestra, especially in the interludes and preludes that depict the moods of the implacable, indifferent sea that is a defining force in this harsh world.