

The COC's *Salome* is Even More Powerful Than Before

Christopher Hoile



★★★★★

by Richard Strauss, directed by Atom Egoyan
Canadian Opera Company, Four Seasons Centre, Toronto
April 21-May 22, 2013

The Canadian Opera Company's revival of *Salome* is a major success. Filmmaker Atom Egoyan first premiered his vision of Richard Strauss's portrait of decadence in 1996. Egoyan tweaked details of the production when it was remounted in 2002 and has done so again this season. This is its best incarnation yet. Not only does it boast a flawless cast headed by Erika Sunnegårdh as Salome, but this is the first time the opera has played in the Four Seasons Centre and thus has a pit big enough to accommodate the 106 musicians Strauss requires.

To hear the opera with the full complement of players is an overwhelming musical experience especially when conductor Johannes Debus and the COC Orchestra have such a magical rapport. Under Debus the orchestra played with impeccable unity, precision and concentration. The delicate internal details were as clear as the score's grandest, most sweeping statements. After hearing this *Salome* one longed for the COC Orchestra to give a concert series, as it used to, featuring some of Strauss's tone poems like *Also Sprach Zarathustra* (1896) or *Ein Heldenleben* (1899) to receive the acclaim it deserves in its own right.

One could enjoy this *Salome* as a musical experience alone, but director Atom Egoyan has brought out more complexity in the drama than he has before. In 1996 his production emphasized the themes of voyeurism and sexual abuse. Herod's desire to watch his stepdaughter dance the "Dance of the Seven Veils" was not merely a private fetish but was reflected in the modern surveillance-heavy updating of the action. Only vestigial elements of this theme remain with the two Soldiers (Evan Boyer and Sam Handley) videoing their surroundings in the first part of the opera.

Egoyan originally used the Dance of the Seven Veils to explain how Salome came to be the disturbed young woman she is. Salome's "veils" become a screening surface that first reflect home movies of an innocent girl on a swing. Threatening images of a forest intervene and the sequence ends with a the shadow of a female dancer attempting to dance alone but finally overpowered by the men attacking her. In 1996 Egoyan depicted the dancer subjected to a gang rape by the five Jews. Now the sequence ends before any sex act is committed. Now the period between the home movies and the shadow dance are filled with a more symbolic competition of the images of the threatening forest and new revolving images, created by Clea Minaker, of ballerina dolls in various attitudes. This much more subtly conveys Salome's loss of innocence.

What emerges more clearly in this remount is the importance of family and politics in the opera. Too often the disputes between Herod and his wife Herodias are made to seem like petty arguments whose function is to highlight Salome's horrifying unity of purpose. Now Egoyan places greater emphasis on the influence of the battle between Salome's mother and stepfather. Herodias wants Jochanaan (John the Baptist) killed because he continually insults her and her royal line. Herod, however, fears to kill Jochanaan both because he fears it will precipitate a rebellion and because he believes that man may actually be a prophet. Oscar Wilde's play, upon which the libretto is based,

thus presents us with the fatal combination of a dominant egocentric mother and a cowardly father whose more careful approach in politics is undermined by the carelessness of incestuous lust. Now when Egoyan has Herodias triumphantly give the head of Jochanaan to Salome, it marks Herodias' latest personal victory over her husband and political disaster for him. Both characters thus emerge much richer as a result.

Egoyan has also made it much clearer that Salome's begging Narraboth to see Jochanaan foreshadows her begging Herodes to give her Jochanaan's head as a reward for her dance. Narraboth gives in but commits suicide out of jealousy when he sees Salome lavish the desire on Jochanaan that he wants for himself. In the same way Herodes eventually gives in to Salome's request but rather than killing himself, he kills Salome both out of disgust and as revenge against Herodias.

Swedish soprano Erika Sunnegårdh gives a breathtaking performance as Salome. The enormous demands Strauss makes never compromise the fullness or beauty of her tone. She is also a consummate actor who portrays the 16-year-old child/woman as lonely and withdrawn and who flirts only because she has learned that is how she can get what she wants. Jochanaan fascinates her because he is immune to her ploys. When she does receive the prophet's head, Sunnegårdh chillingly conveys the sense of combat within her of desire and self-loathing. We feel as if she has to force herself to perform her infamous kiss rather than that she is irresistibly driven to it.

Richard Margison in his role debut as Herodes sings magnificently and brings out all the complexities that Egoyan has found in the character. He reacts like a happy child when Salome finally agrees to dance for him as if he were completely unaware that desire for his stepdaughter was wrong. Yet, his happiness is undermined by Herodias' constant carping and Salome's revolting behaviour.

Hanna Schwarz gives much more life to Herodias than one normally sees. She is fussy, self-important and the only character given to exaggerated gestures. She is clearly outraged that she must be seen to submit to a man she knows is weaker than she is. Although her lines sound a note of constant complaint, Schwarz never loses dark beauty of her lush voice and thereby makes Herodias an even more imposing figure.

German baritone Martin Gantner sings Jochanaan for the first half of the run and American bass-baritone Alan Held for the second half starting May 7. Gantner sang with great authority and impact and makes Jochanaan a figure completely divorced in spirit from the corruption surrounding him. That Salome should sing "Jochanaan, ich bin verliebt in deinen Leib" ("Jochanaan, I am in love with your body") only shows that she understands love only in materialist terms – thus completely unlike Jochanaan's spirituality. She loves that part of him that decays and in his imprisonment is already decaying.

American Nathaniel Peake, the haughty Arturo of *Lucia di Lammermoor* running in rep with *Salome*, displays his powerful tenor to great effect as Narraboth and draws us in much more to his personal tragedy than I've ever seen before. Israeli mezzo-soprano Maya Lahyani has an unusually rich voice as the Page.

Derek McLane's sloping set to reflect the off-kilter world of the opera seems less radical now since the COC's production of *Der fliegende Holländer* uses the same physical metaphor. Michael Whitfield's lighting is superb. He is one designer who is able to convey an atmosphere of foreboding and gloom and still let us see the singers' faces. He masterfully integrates his stage lighting with Phillip Barker's projections and Clea Minaker's shadow designs to impressive effect in the Dance of the Seven Veils. That sequence is now so well conceived that Egoyan's initial use of video to show us the Herodian royal family while Narraboth and the others describe their actions no longer feels necessary and could easily be dropped.

If you have never seen *Salome* before, this is one not to miss. If you have seen this production before, you will find that it has only grown in richness of interpretation, and to hear the work with the forces Strauss intended and played and sung with such power is absolutely thrilling.

Note: A version of this review will appear later this year in Opera News.

Photo: (top) Scene from the Dance of the Seven Veils; (middle) Erika Sunnegårdh with head of John the Baptist. ©2013 Michael Cooper.

