

stage

OPERA PREVIEW

Shadow-makers

Puppeteers shed light on Atom Egoyan's *Salome*

By GLENN SUMI



This Dance Of The Seven Veils scene from 2002 will be reinterpreted in new *Salome*.

SALOME by Richard Strauss and Hedwig Lachmann, from the play by Oscar Wilde, directed by Atom Egoyan, with Erika Sunnegårdh, Richard Margison and Hanna Schwarz. Presented by the Canadian Opera Company at the Four Seasons Centre (145 Queen West). Opens Sunday (April 21) and runs in rep with Lucia Di Lammermoor and Dialogues Des Carmélites until May 22. See coc.ca for times. \$12-5325. 416-363-8231.

When you think of opera, you don't necessarily think of Leslie Feist, the wispy-voiced singer/songwriter who helped sell a zillion iPods.

But when Atom Egoyan was looking to rework his acclaimed 2002 production of the opera *Salome*, he remembered seeing a concert in which the singer had employed shadow puppetry to striking effect. So he tracked down the person responsible for those effects, Clea Minaker, and asked her to join him.

"I think it was the interactivity of the puppetry in the Feist show that he liked," says Minaker. "Shadow puppetry fascinates people. There's the performer who's originating the image and at the same time the im-

age that's being produced. It creates a sense of fragility and the ephemeral that's really touching."

In a rehearsal room at the Canadian Opera Company's Four Seasons Centre, Minaker and puppeteer Faye Dupras have just given me an impromptu lesson in their art. First they let me manipulate a tricked-out flashlight in front of the model of a forest to produce huge shapes on a wall; then they let me move around while they scamper behind me with lights, splitting my image in two as in some surreal nightmare.

"We've got a bag of tricks," says Minaker. "They're as technical as they are artistic. They might seem mysterious and hard to decipher when you're witnessing them, but for the puppeteer it's a series of techniques."

One of the key sections in any production of *Salome* is the climactic Dance Of The Seven Veils, a seductive, sensuously scored scene in which the singer (often replaced by a dancer) unfurls those veils in a striptease, leaving herself naked for the lascivious delectation of her stepfather, Herod.

Egoyan's take on it includes video and puppetry and suggests a history of childhood abuse that might have contributed to *Salome*'s twisted nature.

"It's like a sub-chapter of the opera," says Minaker. "No words have been written, but Strauss's music is trying to tell us something. It's like a rite of passage, a very painful initiation into adulthood."

To achieve the shadow effects in the scene, Minaker, Dupras and their lights will be inches away from the dancer, who of course is hidden behind a screen.

"There's a moment when the dancer stops and holds a pose, and she's sort of vibrating," says Dupras. "We've got to vibrate with her. When I'm really close to the dancer, I'm breathing with her, moving with her - I'm a continuation of her movement. If you see us all backstage, there are moments when we're dancing with her. There's such intimacy."

The two are thrilled to be working in one of the biggest and most elegant theatres in the city.

"It's inspiring, and so noble," says Minaker. "When I toured with Feist, we played in hockey stadiums, and that was sad. All of these people were gathered to see this spectacle, and it happened in an unaesthetic environment with bad acoustics. It's nice to be in a place that exists to honour the magic of live performance." ©

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Clea Minaker's work with Feist impressed Atom Egoyan.

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