

## Cinematic Salome

John Gilks

It comes as no surprise that an opera by Atom Egoyan comes across as somewhat cinematic but it's hard not to use the term of his production of Richard Strauss' *Salome* at Canadian Opera Company. It's quite a spare production. There's a raked stage; the raised end providing a sort of dungeon for Jochanaan and the back and side walls used for projections, especially of a giant mouth prophesying (shades of Big Brother here) and shadow puppets. Costumes are simple and in shades of red, white and green. The concept is based on the idea that Salome is a very young girl who has a history of sexual abuse at the hands of Herod that explains her "monstrousness". It's most vividly explored during the dance of the seven veils where Salome rises above the stage on a swing and her robes form a scrim on which a video is projected. It starts with a very young girl in a garden and gets progressively darker until it finishes up with today's Salome being raped by her stepfather's entourage. Fittingly, the opera ends with Herod himself strangling Salome, perhaps more to silence her than out of disgust.



The casting reinforces the concept. Erika Sunnegårdh in the title role is not the most powerfully voiced of Salomes but she sings sweetly and totally looks the part. She's also a fine actress. Martin Gantner was also on the lighter side as Jochanaan but more in the sense of being bright toned than being underpowered. It will be interesting to see how Alan Held, who will sing the second half of the run, sounds. Hannah Schwartz and Richard Margison as Herodias and Herod were also fine. Both have good German diction and are fine actors and powerful singers and, if neither of them has what might reasonably be called a "beautiful" voice anymore, that hardly matters in these roles. The minor roles were also well acted and sung with Nathaniel Peake's Narraboth and Maya Lahyani's Page providing some interesting diversions during Salome's attempt to seduce Jochanaan. Full credit too to the five squabbling Jews who included several of Toronto's better opera comedians.



No praise could be too high for Johannes Debus and the orchestra. They sounded fabulous throughout though nowhere better than in the scene with the head where the repeated oboe motif over shimmering strings was quite uncanny.



If I had any quibbles about today it would be about the wisdom of opening an Egoyan production of *Salome* with a Sunday matinée. The audience is markedly older than on a weeknight and, I suspect, less attuned to either the work or this approach to it. There was a fair amount of grumbling and the occasional boo but, as the lemur says, anything really good is going to get booed by that section of the audience.



Photo credits: Chris Hutcheson and Michael Cooper courtesy of the Canadian Opera Company