

OPERA REVIEW

Salome soars

SALOME by Richard Strauss and Hedwig Lachmann (Canadian Opera Company). At the Four Seasons Centre (145 Queen West). In rep to May 22. \$12-\$325. 416-363-8231. See Continuing, page 63. Rating: **NNNN**

Atom Egoyan's production of **Salome**, revised since 2002, is one of the dark jewels of the **Canadian Opera Company** and essential viewing for anyone looking for riveting music drama.

Richard Strauss's opera, with a libretto drawn from **Oscar Wilde's** scandalous play, immerses us in the decadent, lurid world of the eponymous young princess of Judea (**Erika Sunnegårdh**), whose obsession with John the Baptist (**Martin Gantner**, alternating with **Alan Held**) leads her to demand his head from her lecherous stepfather, Herod (**Richard Margison**).

Egoyan's production makes fine use of video and shadow puppetry to match the shifting moods and textures of the score. Herod's home, realized by designer **Derek McLane**, is a nouveaux riche fortress of gaudy excess, and his wife, Herodias (**Hanna Schwarz**, looking like a Real Housewife of the Bible), the guards and white-suited advisers must carefully tread the dangerously raked set.

It's hard to imagine a stronger cast of singing actors. Margison's

coked-up Herod is lust and greed incarnate, while Gantner's booming baritone will curl your toes. Look out for **Nathaniel Peake**, whose firm, focused tenor makes his enraptured captain fully three-dimensional.

Of course, any Salome rests on the woman singing the title role, and Swedish soprano Sunnegårdh is the performer of your dreams – or maybe nightmares. Svelte, youthful and gamine, she's a demented, twisted Amélie with a laundry list of fetishes. Her changes from petulant girl to young temptress to full-blown monster are carefully shaded, and she's as comfortable cavorting around the stage in a nightgown as she is belting out her fierce high notes over the full power of the brilliant COC orchestra.

Under conductor **Johannes Debus**, the musicians revel in the complex harmonies, which are shimmeringly enticing one moment, repellant the next.

They're best in the work's centrepiece, the famous Dance Of The Seven Veils, lush with melodies and rhythms that tell a story. Egoyan takes this passage for his coup de théâtre, a mini shadow play (designed by **Clea Minaker**) that fills in Salome's backstory.

It's best not to reveal too much about this scene, but it's a shocker, and adds a touching, disturbing psychological element to this operatic horror story. **GLENN SUMI**

Martin Gantner and Erika Sunnegårdh are bloody awesome in Salome.

