

Opera Review: Tristan und Isolde is Wagner-riffic

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Melanie Diener as Isolde and Ben Heppner as Tristan.

Michael Cooper photo

Theatre tonight, or the movies? Maybe a concert? We had the unusual option of partaking of all three in the Four Seasons Centre on Tuesday as the Canadian Opera Company opened a run of Wagner's *Tristan und Isolde*. This might seem a pat way of describing the Peter Sellars staging, conceived originally for the Paris Opera, but ticketholders need to know that their perceptions will be seriously triangulated by this show, maybe rectangulated, given the attention they are also expected to pay to surtitles.

What we would normally classify as the theatrical dimension is very subdued. There is no set, apart from a platform for Tristan to lie and die on, and no costumes to speak of, with nondescript black and Goodwill grubbies prevailing. Lighting is static, except insofar as performers stationed in the balconies and aisles also are spotlighted.

Most of the visual content resides in the HD screen overhead, where a slow-moving but nonstop video by Bill Viola unfolds, either commenting on the narrative and musical elements or dictating them, depending on your point view. Most of the imagery is aquatic, with fire in second position. There are some spooky Blair Witch Project forest scenes and grainy erotic encounters, these abstract and evocative.

Most memorable, for better or worse, is an extended sequence in Act 1 in which two models of intermediate age and indifferent looks take an eternity to walk slowly inland from the sea, disrobe in what seems to be a crypt and perform ablutions.

If I have not yet mentioned any live performers, this fact handily underlines the dilemma created by the use of lavish HD visuals in opera. Can spectators who are mesmerized by a screenful of votive candles in Act 2 pay appropriate aural attention to the passionate love duet surging underneath?

Another question: Can a conductor (COC music director Johannes Debus, replacing the originally announced Jiří Bělohlávek) follow the trajectory of the score according to his or her own musical conscience while a video moves ruthlessly forward? I feared the worst during the gelatinous Prelude, but afterwards there was a palpable sense of momentum, and good playing from the COC Orchestra, a few intonation issues notwithstanding.

Happily, vocalism was mostly magnificent, so the task of wrenching your attention from that bleeping screen was not as effortful an operation as it might otherwise have been. Ben Heppner was in grand form, hailing the love potion in clarion tones in Act 2 and bringing us thoroughly into his world of exalted suffering in Act 3. It says something of his achievement that he came off as a hero in a distinctly non-heroic pair of pajamas.

The German soprano Melanie Diener expended a lot of voice and emotion on Acts 1 and 2, thus leaving her batteries low for the celebrated conclusion (which came more than five hours after this apparently uncut performance began, two half-hour intermissions included). Still, she produced the necessary shivers. Baritone Alan Held was firm and potent as Kurwenal while his fellow Americans Daveda Karanas and Ryan McKinny produced crisp portrayals of Brangäne and Melot. The German bass Franz-Josef Selig brought astounding sound and sympathy to the potentially patience-challenging monologue of King Marke.

He was aided, it should be noted, by the fact that the screen during this sequence offered nothing more distracting than a generic landscape with a tree, leaving viewers free to concentrate on what matters. One also sensed that Selig was acting a tad more openly than his colleagues, possibly without the approval of the director, who generally decreed glacial movement and as little human interaction as possible. Often characters claimed to see things they were not looking at and to be doing things they were not doing.

Was this one reason that Sellars, trademark pompadour intact, attracted a few boos when he walked on stage to take his bow? Or were some patrons disappointed by the relative lack of silly modern interpolations that usually weigh down his productions? This is a thought-provoking *Tristan* that might not appeal to all. But it cannot be denied at the final curtain that Wagner's opera is what we are being asked to think about.

Tristan und Isolde continues to Feb. 23.