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**Arts**

**OPERA**

**A magical musical homecoming**

**Tristan und Isolde**  
Canadian Opera Company  
Four Seasons Centre, in Toronto

REVIEWED BY  
**ROBERT HARRIS**

Here's a sentence Toronto has been waiting to read for 17 years:

Ben Heppner was magnificent Tuesday night on the stage of the Canadian Opera Company. Stunning, open-hearted, in robust and thrilling voice, creating a dramatic homecoming that banished all worrisome thoughts anyone might have had about this remarkable performer. As he told several interviewers in the days leading up to Tuesday's performance, with just a hint of belligerence and pride: "I'm back." Indeed, he is.

That Heppner's performance is the first thing that deserves mention in a review of the COC's current production of *Tristan und Isolde* is even more noteworthy when you realize that the production itself, directed by globally renowned Peter Sellars with videos by acclaimed American artist Bill Viola, is one of the most dramatic, moving and resonant operatic experiences the COC has ever presented. For all its fame, Richard Wagner's *Tristan und Isolde* often fails to deliver its potential emotional megawattage. Its singers have to be almost superhuman, and the traditional stagecraft of opera often turns this deep story of interior emotional conflict and release into a conventional, sad little drama. The immense power of *Tristan* often lies untouched.

That's where Sellars's pared-down staging, with no sets, one prop, and costumes almost universally in black works so well. It draws the focus of our attention to an immense screen behind the performers on which are projected a series of intensely moving, often beautiful, subtle and symbolic images. It's true that splitting your attention between screen and performers can take a little getting used to, but once accomplished, Viola's images, of figures plunging into, writhing within, or walking into water, or confronted by blazing walls of fire which turn liquid, or witnessing a real-time sunrise, offer a dazzling series of visual gestures which deepen the sense of Wagner's music. But differently for every audience member, as Viola structures his images to allow for multiple interpretations. Viola decided early on not to render the *Tristan* story literally. Instead, he has found his inspi-



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MICHAEL COOPER

ration in the same mythic story that inspired Wagner himself. The result is having two deep artistic responses to the same story join together on some subconscious level, or witnessing the shock of recognition of two members of the same family, long separated by centuries of dispersal, unaware of each other's existence, finally joining

together in reunion. All of a sudden, we are, in effect, witnessing two Tristans - which, magically, support and deepen each other.

However, on Tuesday night, despite the brilliance of Sellars's and Viola's combined vision, it was the excellence of the voices that brought this *Tristan* to striking life. Starting with

Heppner. His Tristan is less a hero and more a tortured, troubled soul, filled with longing, pride, and confusion. This whirlpool of emotions allowed Heppner to play Tristan with an immensely varied palette. For a man with as big a voice as Heppner has, it's remarkable how many colours and accents he is able to project with it. And Melanie Diener, singing her first Isolde, matched Ben, singing maybe his 70th *Tristan*, phrase for ecstatic phrase. Diener does not have the traditional power of an Isolde, and that was all to the good - her well-controlled and effortless soprano was as flexible as Heppner's tenor, even if she does not quite have his understanding of the dramatics of her part. But when the two of them dug into the series of duets that make Act 2 of *Tristan* among the most spine-chilling of all musical experiences, something close to musical perfection was in the air.

The supporting roles in this production were first-rate as well. Franz-Josef Selig projected a defeated, desperate melancholy as the betrayed King Marke (the King Arthur figure in this Arthur-Lancelot-Guinevere tale) in his two enormous solos in Acts 2 and 3. Each was spell-binding. Alan Held was powerful and menacing as Tristan's comrade, Kurvenal, with an immense stage presence. Daveda Karanas sang the role of Isolde's companion, Brangane (for whom Wagner wrote some of the most beautiful music in the opera) with conviction and verve. And in the pit, the COC Orchestra was tightly and energetically led by conductor Johannes Debus, the COC's music director, also making his *Tristan* debut. Debus shaped the famous preludes to the three acts with skill and imagination, and provided careful and balanced accompaniment for the rest. The orchestra is almost another character in this opera, and it played its part with real sensitivity and depth.

In the end, the success of this superb production rested on something of an anomaly. Its extremely original touches - the intertwining of events on stage with events on video, the clever use of instrumentalists and singers stationed throughout the hall, the quiet, subtle action on stage - allowed us to focus on the music almost more thoroughly than we ever have before. The result - stagecraft of genius, and music of power and passion - was overwhelming.

Special to *The Globe and Mail*



**MUSIC**

**The comeback**

Robert Harris sings the praises of Ben Heppner and the COC's brilliant *Tristan und Isolde*

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