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ENTERTAINMENT



Ben Heppner as Tristan in the Canadian Opera Company's 2013 production of *Tristan and Isolde*.

MICHAEL COOPER PHOTO

Transcendent Tristan

Tristan and Isolde
★★★★ (out of 4)
By Richard Wagner.
Directed by Peter Sellars. Until Feb. 23 at the Four Seasons Centre for the Performing Arts, 145 Queen St. W. 416-363-8231

RICHARD OUZOUNIAN
THEATRE CRITIC
It's a transcendent experience. That is simply the only way to describe the COC production of *Tristan and Isolde* that opened at the Four Seasons Centre for the Performing Arts on Tuesday night.
Clocking in at more than five hours and utilizing the talents of some of the major names in the opera world, one expected this Wagnerian production would have a great deal of heft to it. And indeed it did, with Ben Heppner's Tristan raging against the pain of love lost, found, then lost again forever,

with a power that seared the soul. The COC's music director, Johannes Debus, led his orchestra masterfully, sending out wave after wave of sound without ever degenerating into bombast, while the direction of Peter Sellars used the strength of simple ritual to focus our attention on this saga of two individuals both cursed and blessed by the gods.

TRISTAN continued on E6



>> ENTERTAINMENT

Opera's emotional depth lets us see past the grandeur

TRISTAN from E1

But the astonishing thing about this version of *Tristan und Isolde* is that, while offering all of the aforementioned power that one seeks in Wagner, there was an emotional depth as well that let us see past the grandeur into the torment of two spirits in agony.

Melanië Diener's Isolde was the key here, a woman of recognizable passions, tossed between hate and love the way that she and Tristan are tossed by the sea on their fateful journey to Cornwall. Diener's voice is like mead, the ancient honey wine that warms while it intoxicates. As she juggles her conflicting emotions about Tristan, we sense every gradation of her inner struggle and ache with the pain she is forced to endure.

Debus also helps raise the temperature by infusing the score with a delicacy that allows us to feel the way that the greatest emotions begin by setting off tiny reverberations in our spirit.

And the genius of Bill Viola's video design offers a non-stop perspective of images that combine nature with poetry and humans with mythic events, pleasing the eye while feeding the mind.

Sellars is the daring high priest here, using nothing but a few simple platforms — ritual altars, if you will — where the story plays out in stark elegance. But he also courageously extends the vocalists (and even some members of the orchestra) far into the reaches of the Four Seasons Centre, having music come from the top of the vertiginous fifth ring to shock and amaze.

But this is more than a gimmick to arrest our eyes and ears. During the moments when live sound envelops us like the most glorious human Dolby system possible, we are all united in community, in performance of the ritual, in celebration of a mysterious rite that unites the sacred and the profane.

It's a sweeping tale of ancient warriors, murder and revenge, secret potions that can bring love or death in a sip and individuals who find their hearts being tugged into directions that their spirits want to resist. There is grandeur in every moment of its story.

But let us be honest. *Tristan und Isolde* can also be tough going for an audience in the opera house. Its length works against it and when the story itself becomes mundane near the end of Act II at the four-

hour mark, it's possible to begin constructing walls of resistance.

Yet, if you do so, you will find them crumbling in the unforgettable Act III, where Tristan, on the very knife's edge of death, revisits his life and goes on a spiritual quest which is as harrowing as it is ultimately rewarding.

This is where all of the production's elements shift into the highest of gears. Heppner is unquestionably superb as he dives deep into childhood loss, adult pain and eternal regret. As he looks toward his own death, you can see him play out the legendary five stages of grief: denial, anger, bargaining, depression and acceptance. It's a performance of vocal daring and dramatic honesty.

Viola's artistry is at its height here as well. There are moments in the

first two acts when the literal nature of some of the videography might be unsettling, but by the end, we are in a world of pure subconscious imagery where fire and water, light and dark, earth and sky all melt together, just as they might in a man's mind during his final moments on Earth.

There isn't enough room to catalogue the production's virtues, but solid support from Daveda Karanas as Brangäne and Alan Held as Kurwenal keep this ship on keel, while vocal contributions from Owen McCausland, Adam Luther and Robert Gleadow ring out like inspired brass instruments.

We live in a city with a truly great opera company and this production of *Tristan und Isolde* is a triumphant reminder of that fact. Let us celebrate it.