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The Toronto Sun ■ THURSDAY, JANUARY 31, 2013

Emotional rollercoaster

Modern take on Tristan und Isolde focuses on the internal voyage of Wagner's star-crossed lovers

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Special to the Toronto Sun

While it would never win any sort of following, one suspects, as a modern day action/adventure story, there is nonetheless something powerfully elemental about the power of Richard Wagner's epic opera, *Tristan und Isolde*.

For while, in spinning out the timeless tragedy of an Irish princess and the knight torn between his love for her and his love for his liege lord, Wagner arranged it so that most of the action happened off stage, he concentrated his awe-inspiring musical creativity on the internal voyage of the star-crossed lovers at the heart of his tale instead.

And in staging this epic work — which, no matter how you cut it, gives precious few minutes change from a five-and-a-half-hour investment — for a modern audience, director Peter Sellars opts to embrace its rather glacial pacing and explore it to its fullest, rather than attempt to pass it off as a lot of shaved ice.

Originally created for the Opera national de Paris in 2005, Sellars' visionary production of the Wagnerian classic has been recreated for the Canadian Opera Company on the stage of the Four Seasons Centre, where it opened in a limited run Tuesday.

With soprano Melanie Diener cast as Isolde opposite our own Ben Heppner,

returning to the COC stage in triumph as Tristan, this is a treasure trove of truly impressive vocal talent, as these two most impressive singers team with bass-baritone Alan Held, bass Franz-Josef Selig, soprano Daveda Karanas to inhabit and illuminate Wagner's tragic yet oddly celebratory tale.

As befits such a story, Sellars stages it with stark simplicity, using only a few risers and the impressive lighting design of James F. Ingalls to delineate his setting, at the same time, embracing the magnificent talent of his cast and spreading it through breadth and width of the hall, transforming it into an adventure in operatic surround sound.

For the rest — from sea voyages through nighttime trysts and lingering deaths — he cocoons his audience in the heart of the artistic vision of Bill Viola, who uses slow motion video footage to reinforce the interior aspect of the story.

While the result — footage in which both the heat of searing passion and its cleansing fluidity are highlighted — could on occasion be compared to watching paint dry, it is unquestionably painted by a true master who renders the process far more riveting than mind-numbing. Seamlessly interwoven with Wagner's masterful and breathtaking score, served up

WE SAY:
★★★★½
out of 5



MICHAEL COOPER

Melanie Diener plays Isolde and Ben Heppner portrays Tristan in the Canadian Opera Company's production of *Tristan und Isolde*.

virtually free of Wagnerian cliché by the COC Orchestra under the assured baton of Johannes Debus, this is a production that puts the audi-

ence at the very centre of the drama, for good or for ill.

And while it is clearly not to everyone's taste, as evidenced by some catcalls dur-

ing the opening night curtain call, for those prepared to surrender to the sheer monumental quality of the emotion, *Tristan und Iso-*

lde is likely to leave you in a state of enervated exultation.

Which, in the world of opera, is a pretty fine place to be.