

In review:
LOS ANGELES OPERA

The Rise and Fall of the City of Mahagonny Weill
Tannhäuser Wagner

Leave it to the Los Angeles Opera, ambitious facilitator of high and low culture, to strongly underscore and amplify the logical, retrospectively umbilical connection between Brecht-Weill's Mahagonny and America's Las Vegas. The former is an apocryphal but ever-relevant sin city in a desert-like netherworld. The latter is an actual sin city in a desert-like netherworld, which sprouted to its fullest, gaudiest flower decades after Mahagonny's Weimar Republic vintage. Yet the LA Opera's recent epoch-stitching touch is anything but a glib and facile gesture.

More than the version that passed through this venue in the early 1990s, the new LA Opera staging of *The Rise and Fall of the City of Mahagonny* gives credence to the clearly operatic ambitions of Weill's writing. When done up properly, as it was here, we can see how Weill was moving above and beyond musical theatre of a vernacular sort. Serious intentions are in force, from the tart, Hindemith/Stravinsky-esque polytonality of its overture through the haunting infectiousness of its classic 'Alabama Song', on through the musical and thematic entanglements as the plot thickens and human spirits are dashed over the opera's course.

Much credit for the dignifying gleam of the production, directed by John Doyle, goes to the singing talent, especially the bold vocal insights and acting sass of Audra McDonald and Patti LuPone – both of whom have experience successfully crossing the street between Broadway and the operatic realm. As Jimmy McIntyre, Anthony Dean Griffey was effectively venal and fun-loving in this hell-bound hedonistic playground, summoning alternately rich and raucous tones, to suit the scenery. McDonald, in particular, made for a vocally robust and inescapably sexy Jenny Smith.

In the orchestra pit, the company's wisely chosen new music director James Conlon (replacing Kent Nagano) showed the right Weill-ish stuff, deftly mixing street smarts and Modernist elegance in the performance.

Still, the visuals and staging worked wonders as a critical connective tissue for the vocal, orchestral and dramatic elements. In Mark Bailey's set design, a few effectively spare staging notions imparted minimalist code for Mahagonny/Vegas: traffic lights, well-placed Route 666 signage, and telephone poles and I-beams lowered onto the stage, in lean geometric angulations. In Act II, they bring on the gaudy neon and the glare of empty utopian promises. Just as Lars von Trier nods to



Chaste and pure: Petra Maria Schnitzer in *Tannhäuser*

Mahagonny in his film *Mandeville* (and its companion piece *Dogville*), the stark and glum, symbolic settings of those films in turn seem to influence the schematic nature of this production. In turn, the mannered effect softens the dour conclusions of the dramatic premise. The human condition may not be so bad, after all, if we can create and enjoy theatre together.

Bringing on the finale, the motley, massed ensemble floated and echoed the culminating fatalistic shrug of a refrain, 'nothing you can do will help a dead man'. This cynical cautionary tale from between the wars had the desired effect, in 2007, of seeming at once a prophetic period piece and also, unfortunately, renewably relevant in the world we know.

For all its other virtues and areas of forward momentum at the Los Angeles Opera, the Wagner cause is still in its formative stages, which made this season's new production of *Tannhäuser* a notable event in town. Judging from the more sensationalist buzz about the production, not to mention the opera's own titillating publicity efforts, the main event might have seemed to be the unhinged eroticism and unclad, writhing bodies in the opening scene. Couples disrobe and writhe, in undulating polyrhythms, to Wagner's pulse, while engaging in anarchic loin-oriented liaisons as our hero struggles with temptations of the flesh in *The Venusberg*. All of this transpired beneath, or atop, the luxurious musical dynamics of the *Tannhäuser* overture (ravishingly laid out on conductor James Conlon's orchestral table).

Yes, the scene was unabashedly sensuous, an orgy which was sexually correct in its choreography, and soaked in suggestive red, for good measure. Just as importantly, the passage of fleshy heat served as a point of departure in this tale of friction between divine and libidinal love, between spiritual transcendence and ecstasy by the hour. On the whole, the remaining length of director Ian Judge's production, with Gottfried Pilz minimally elemental – not to mention kinetic and morphing – sets, errs on the side of the austere, as if atoning for the explicitness of the Venusberg affair.

Red yields to white, with allegoric directness, as *Tannhäuser* returns to the Wartburg and the world of penitent pilgrims. Later, after another fall from grace, green becomes the dominant colour onstage. At one point, red, white and green vie for moral control in the saga, in a colour-coded design which perhaps went a bit too far, but also provided continuity and cool over the opera's epic sprawl.

Measured degrees of coolness and intensity also came in the form of musical-dramatic aspects. As heard on record and stage before, Peter Seiffert is masterful in the lead role. The heldentenor conveys necessary power but also critical vulnerability, as he palpably oscillated between the allures of the chaste Elisabeth (Petra Maria Schnitzer, pure and strong in her reading) and Venus (Lioba Braun, impure and strong). Martin Gantner, as Wolfram von Eschenbach, beautifully articulated the celestial lustre of 'O du, mein holder Abendstern', the last ray of lyrical gleam in Wagner's tale of torment.

By the time the chorus sings the final Pilgrim's Chorus, intoning 'redemption is the sinner's reward', orgiastic memories from three hours earlier on the stage are long faded. Ultimately, a strong air of religiosity prevails in this production, even if our baser instincts are lubed at the outset. It makes the redemption all the sweeter.

JOSEF WOODARD



Hell-bound hedonism: Patti LuPone in LA Opera's *Mahagonny*