

the recent Long Beach Opera production of Ricky Ian Gordon's *Orpheus & Euridice* was the odd mixture of operatic trappings and the distinct smell of chlorine. For this world premiere of Gordon's music/dance piece, described as a 'theatrical song cycle', the whole affair went poolside, in the vast Belmont Plaza Olympic Pool, next to the Pacific Ocean in Long Beach. The River Styx of the Orpheus myth was thus duly transformed into a chlorinated lap pool – and why not?

In the ranks of new opera composers, Gordon's star has notably risen in recent years, after the success of his 2007 opera *The Grapes of Wrath* and commissions – including a call from the Met – in the pipeline. Gordon's warmed-over *Orpheus*, though, didn't impress much on musical terms, at least by operatic standards. The musical language here wriggles uncomfortably between the landscapes of opera and Broadway, between the Copland of *Tender Land* fame and Stephen Sondheim's angular lyricism. A slow, edgeless and ceremonial sense of movement guided the piece, written by Gordon in memory of his partner, who succumbed to AIDS.

Our fearless musical protagonists were clarinetist Todd Palmer (who commissioned the original piece, before it started morphing in its forms) and the luminous soprano Elizabeth Futral. But their dramatic doppelgängers, dubbed Orpheus 2 and Euridice 2, were dancers Dylan Kenin and Lauren Mace, who moved fluidly around inside the pool, in a slow-moving boat and otherwise. The audience sat in bleachers, across the pool

from another bleacher turned stage set. The swarming venue created a swimming acoustic environment for the singers and a pared-down instrumental ensemble featuring pianist Michelle Schumann and the Denali String Quartet. Visual aids, including an advancing blanket of stage smoke and rippling reflections on the walls accentuated the watery milieu, in ways subtle and otherwise. Too often, the 'otherwise' won out.

In effect, it was business as unusual in Long Beach, whose opera company has staked its reputation on dodging traditions of repertoire, setting, venue and other aspects in the operatic machinery. Current director Andreas Mitisek has continued the tradition-goosing habit in his few years at the helm, including this alternately sweet, cloying and soggy production. Sometimes, it's possible to greatly admire the LBO's pluck and imagination, even when the end results fail to soar at intended altitude. This was one of those times.

**JOSEF WOODARD**

## Orpheus & Euridice

Ricky Ian Gordon

LONG BEACH OPERA

One of the first unorthodox impressions encountered at

the swim: Orpheus and Euridice at Long Beach

KEITH IAN POLAKOFF



In the swim: Orpheus and Euridice at Long Beach