

Magical Midsummer Night a dream come true

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A MIDSUMMER NIGHT'S DREAM

- The Canadian Opera Company
- At the Four Seasons Centre in Toronto on Tuesday

'Let us recount our dreams.' These words, sung near the end of Benjamin Britten's *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, neatly summarize the entire opera, as well as the Canadian Opera Company's first-ever performance of it, which looked and sounded very much like a dream come true.

No opera composer has ever gulped down as much undiluted Shakespeare as Britten did with this piece, and nobody has made the poet's pentameter sing so well for so long. The miracle is that he did it with such direct, simple-sounding, yet deeply magical music.



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Laura Claycomb as Tytania in the COC's *Dream*. (*Michael Cooper*)



It only took a minute or two for the sighing, muted glissandi that begin the opera to create a mood of somnolent mystery, well supported by Dale Ferguson's aqua-toned set. A fluid, undulating "veil of sleep" (in reality a broad sheet of sea-green plastic) bucked and rippled above the stage like a wave meeting a shore suspended in the ether.

The opera, like the play, is a drama about desires that lead us between the real world (whatever that is) and imaginary ones. Every performer in the show played a vital role in revealing the contours of this often erotic boundary.

At one extreme were the scampering fairies (members of the Canadian Children's Opera Company), singing their wise, innocent-sounding music, their pale bodies looking almost translucent in some of Damien Cooper's light settings. At the other end were the six Rustics, as Britten called Shakespeare's workmen, wrestling with the balky fictions of their opera within the opera, giving the trombones a workout.

The fairy royals, Oberon and Tytania, were beautifully sung by countertenor Lawrence Zazzo and

soprano Laura Claycomb. Their sullen duet "Ill met by moonlight" was a delicious mixture of grandeur and pique.

Claycomb's coloratura was freshness itself, and in her close-fitting gown and long gauzy trains, she exuded the formal sensuality of a Gibson Girl. Zazzo brought a lovely sound and majestic feeling to his plain declarative melodies, though his spangled jacket, big hair and face paint made him look like he was prepping for a glam-band reunion. He spent most of his scenes gliding across the stage on a tiny aerial platform, which wasn't very magical and gave him less actual mobility than a wheelchair.

The excellent quartet of lovers (soprano Giselle Allen, mezzo-soprano Elizabeth DeShong, tenor Adam Luther and baritone Wolfgang Holzmaier) wore varieties of casual dress circa 1960 (the year of the opera's premiere), and got steadily grubbier as their night in the forest wore on. They did a terrific job of the opera's most dramatic sequence, a four-way squabble culminating in a retort by DeShong that was a small masterpiece of contained fury. Anne Manson's watchful, imaginative conducting of singers and orchestra was especially powerful in this scene.

People laughed when Tytania greeted her donkey lover (bass Robert Pomakov, in a rich comic turn as Bottom), partly because of the stylistic gulf between his rugged, angular dance and her gossamer song with harps and flutes.

But when they nestled down and she sang "O how I love thee," there was nothing to laugh about because the music told you that at that moment her feeling was absolutely genuine.

Neil Armfield's imaginative direction included countless details that enhanced the sense or spirit of the drama. Hermia clutched at the stitch in her side as she ran after Demetrius; Flute as Thisbe (tenor Lawrence Wiliford) committed a hilarious suicide, and Tytania's gauzy trains tumbled down from the rising veil of sleep (which doubled as a fairy hammock) exactly the way I imagine Mélisande's long hair cascading from Debussy's

window.

The stage narrowed to a proscenium with broad steps for the final scene, in which Hippolyta (mezzo-soprano Kelley O'Connor) and Theseus (bass-baritone Robert Gleadow) appeared looking just like Jackie and John F. Kennedy at his inaugural ball, which occurred seven months after the opera's premiere. The Rustics' play (which also featured tenors Michael Barrett, bass-baritone Thomas Goerz, baritone Alexander Hajek and bass Michael Uloth) was very funny to witness, and to hear, thanks to Britten's wicked parodies of French and Italian opera. Actor Jamaal Grant capered very effectively as Puck, the sometimes faulty engineer of dreams.

The COC's production of A Midsummer Night's Dream continues at the Four Seasons Centre through May 23.

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