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This dark night has a delicious, gorgeous Dream

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JOHN TERAUDS
CLASSICAL MUSIC CRITIC

A Midsummer Night's Dream

★★★★ (out of 4)

By Benjamin Britten. Canadian Opera Company. Directed by Neil Armfield. Anne Manson, conductor. To May 23. Four Seasons Centre for the Performing Arts, 145 Queen St. W.

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If anyone is familiar with Shakespeare's *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, it's Torontonians, who get to see it mounted regularly in High Park, among other places. It is, for all intents and purposes, a comic romp about love.

But when Benjamin Britten and his partner Peter Pears sat down to snip the libretto into a size and shape to suit an opera, which had its premiere at their festival in Aldeburgh, England, in June 1960, the story emerged darker.

The new Canadian Opera Company production, which opened at the Four Seasons Centre for the Performing Arts last night, is even darker.

Under director Neil Armfield's tightly organized eye and within designer Dale Ferguson's murky fantastical set, the play becomes darker still, stepping over the fine line from whimsy into Jungian psychoanalysis, where the woods can be particularly dark metaphors for our subconscious activity.

When the two young Athenian couples are properly reunited toward the end of the play, they leave the stage singing "let us recount our dreams."

Jung would have been pleased.

Whether operagoers are pleased depends on what matters to them as they sit through this 2 1/2-hour voyage.

This production, originated by Houston Grand Opera earlier this season, is gorgeous. Three sheets of painted canvas, a floating plastic tarp and Damien Cooper's deft lighting take only moments to whisk us off into the forest of the subconscious.

The music is beautifully rendered. Britten's score is as simple as Ferguson's set, conveying mood, emotion and motion with utmost economy – a string chord here, a little flourish of woodwind there. The orchestra, led by Ann Manson (the Manitoba Chamber Orchestra's new music director), breathed in unison with Britten's gently rising and falling music.

The plastic tarp rose and fell with the same grace as the score, further enhancing the gossamer effect.

The large singing cast is excellent.

Particularly noteworthy are the member of the Canadian Children's Opera Company, expertly prepared by Ann Cooper Gay in their substantial singing roles as the woodland fairies.

American counter-tenor Lawrence Zazzo is impressive as Oberon, soprano Laura Claycomb was a sweetly fluttery Tytania. American mezzo Elizabeth DeShong, making her Toronto debut as Hermia, has a stunningly rich and powerful voice.

Local favourite, bass Robert Pomakov was an energetic Bottom, but never found the right amount of humour to leaven his heavily written vocal part.

Actor Jamaal Grant qualifies as an acrobat for his fantastic physical work as Puck, the only character who speaks his lines in the opera.

All of these elements combine to deliver an opera experience that's close to being magical in this *Midsummer Night's Dream*. I wondered what was missing to really make all of these assets gel, and the only thing I could think of was how the music separates Shakespeare's tight dialogue into loosely woven fragments, taking away energy without putting enough back.

Instead, though, one can simply sit back and marvel at the careful stage and musical direction behind this dark and delicious mix of old and new on an opera stage.

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