

Charleston The other 'Lady'

This was not a vintage year for opera in this usually charming Southern city. Commercial advantage has replaced artistic merit in too many decisions concerning the American version of Spoleto. Where opera has been a crowning jewel of previous Spoleto Festival USA seasons, this year's schedule offered only one opera, Shostakovich's *Lady Macbeth of the Mtsensk District* in an English version by Edward Downes (May 22).

Visually and orchestrally, the production could be called stunning. The Romanian conductor Christian Badea led a spirited, beautifully lyrical interpretation that emphasised the foreign, rather than Russian, influences on the young composer. In such purely orchestral moments as the second-act interlude, Badea elicited gorgeous playing, particularly from strings and wind; the contrast with the routine performance earlier in the day by the New York Philharmonic, in an orchestral concert led by Erich Leinsdorf, was striking. Badea supported his singers deftly, never drowning them, making the Downes translation consistently audible. One wonders, however, if Russian would not have been more appropriate, for the English seemed too often to trivialize a libretto of precious little distinction.

The visual qualities were of less even quality, but the set at times, and lighting always, gave great pleasure. Patricia Collins lit the stage not statically, but with lights that moved to emphasize psychological contrasts, changing shadow lines, evoking the bleakness of Russian country life. The permanent set was on a half turntable, so that a building interior (the Ismailov bedroom, police station) could roll away to reveal a larger open space (all exteriors).



Nancy Henninger as Katerina and Jacque Trussel as Sergei in 'Lady Macbeth of the Mtsensk District' at the Spoleto USA Festival

Created in bare wood, under the stark lighting, it gave impressive graphic qualities to the Gailliard Auditorium's much mis-used stage. Yet producer/designer Liviu Ciulei overemphasized his set, adding an internal scene change to the last scene of the opera, unnecessarily complicating the production. Ever consistent, Spoleto USA has often persuaded designers to produce. Now the reverse holds, and it was the set, not the staging, that dominated.

Nevertheless, the acting was of uniformly high standard. Kari Nurmela's Boris was both dark and humorous; his waltz on one foot in the insomnia aria of Act 2 was fully evocative of his character, even as musical hints of Richard Strauss underlined the nocturnal mis-balancing of his life. Jacque Trussel's Sergei was heroic, a Lensky in peasant's clothing, high of mind and spirit. Nancy Henninger's Katerina was robust, a healthy peasant type. Yet, none of these but Trussel commanded the vocal resources to convince totally. When the cellos and double basses prepare a sinister entry for bass voice and the voice is too weak to sustain the image, then the intended impact is lost. Thus it often was, for no one, not Nurmela, not the chorus, not even the other principals, possessed the rich chest register that characterizes Slavonic singing.

But, for Badea's efforts, a return to any of the later three performances would have been justified.

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