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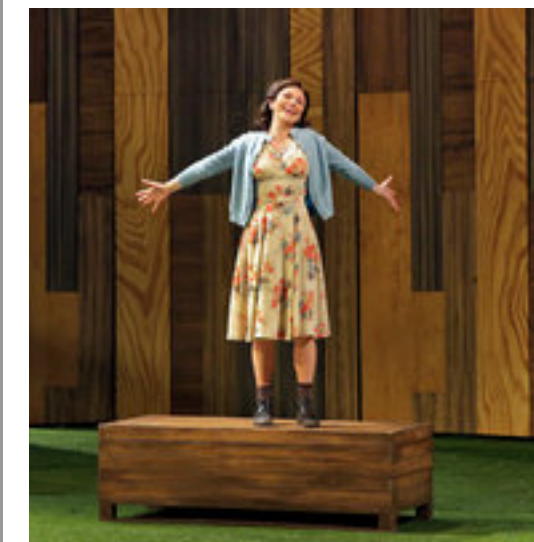
The Rare Heroine Who Prevails

'The Kiss' at the Opera Theater of St. Louis

By VIVIEN SCHWEITZER
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ST. LOUIS — In a [recent interview](#) the mezzo-soprano [Alice Coote](#) said that the opera industry was “very much still a male preserve,” adding, “It’s still a man’s world.” Few recent premieres have featured scores or librettos by women. But Czech lady librettists were common in the late 19th century, when Smetana wrote his now rarely performed “Kiss,” a comedy set to texts by Eliska Krasnohorska.

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Ken Howard

Drawing a line: Corinne Winters as Vendulka in “The Kiss.”

When it comes to opera heroines, especially rebellious ones, few survive unscathed, if at all. In the role of the peasant girl Vendulka, Krasnohorska created a rarity: a strong female protagonist who lives to tell the tale, with sanity intact. The soprano [Corinne Winters](#) portrayed the wholesome heroine with a radiant voice and winsome allure here on Thursday in the [Opera Theater of St. Louis's](#) charming staging, a co-production with Ireland's [Wexford Festival Opera](#).

Vendulka is to marry Lukas, whose wife has just died, a match not approved of by her father, whose cranky outbursts were amusingly conveyed by the bass-baritone Matthew Burns. Out of deference to Lukas's deceased spouse, Vendulka refuses to kiss Lukas until their wedding. Lukas, whose manipulative tricks and eventual repentance were vividly illuminated by the bright-voiced tenor Garrett Sorenson, sulks, drinks and flirts with other women. Vendulka, upset, joins a band of smugglers. Lukas asks for forgiveness and the opera ends with — what else? — a kiss.

Anthony Barrese conducted a lively reading of the score, with its tuneful Czech-inflected melodies and stirring orchestral accompaniment. (Smetana was completely deaf when he composed the work in the mid-1870s.)

The action, ably directed by Michael Gieleta, unfolded in front of an attractive wood-paneled backdrop, enlivened by the cast's colorful Czech costumes. Cast members in the smaller roles, all well sung, included the mezzo-soprano Elizabeth Batton, the soprano Emily Duncan-Brown, the baritone Matthew Worth and the bass-baritone Charles Z. Owen.

The Opera Theater of St. Louis is also presenting Puccini's “Tabarro” and Leoncavallo's “Pagliacci” as an intense

double bill this month, with both conducted by Ward Stare and directed by Ron Daniels.

The heroines of both works rebel against the confines of their bleak lives, but in typical operatic fashion, one ends up dead, the other heartbroken.

The atmospheric set of “Il Tabarro” featured a photograph of a barge on the Seine from Jean Vigo’s 1934 film, [Atalante](#). As Giorgetta and Michele, the unhappily married barge dwellers, the soprano Emily Pulley and the baritone Tim Mix revealed the couple’s misery with emotionally nuanced singing and acting. The tenor Michael Hayes sang expressively as Luigi, the equally unhappy stevedore murdered by the jealous Michele.

Mr. Mix wielded his sonorous baritone to even more potent effect as Tonio in the company’s sizzling production of “Pagliacci,” a work usually paired with Mascagni’s “Cavalleria Rusticana.” Nedda, like Giorgetta, dreams of escaping a life she abhors.

Riccardo Hernandez’s striking sets were dominated by large, illuminated letters spelling “circus.” Sinister clowns in whiteface and ruffles (costumes by Emily Rebholz) wandered in the audience and watched the play within a play like a silent Greek chorus.

The lustrous-voiced soprano [Kelly Kaduce](#) offered a tour de force performance as Nedda, in a black bodice and tutulike skirt as Colombina, Nedda’s stage persona. The simmering tensions between Nedda and Canio, her husband, portrayed with fierce intensity by Robert Brubaker, reached a boiling point in this riveting staging. The fine cast also included Troy Cook as Silvio and Matthew DiBattista as Beppe.

You knew what was coming, of course, but it was nonetheless hard not to feel shocked as Nedda, murdered by her jealous husband, sank to her knees like a dying swan.

“The Kiss” will be repeated on Wednesday and Friday, and “Pagliacci” and “Il Tabarro” on Tuesday and Saturday, at the Opera Theater of St. Louis; (314) 961-0644; [opera-stl.org](#).

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