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# Koanga and Guglielmo Ratcliff, Wexford Festival, review: 'sultry and luscious'



GUGLIELMO RATCLIFF BY MASCAGNI; WEXFORD FESTIVAL OPERA CREDIT: CLIVE BARDA

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By John Allison

26 OCTOBER 2015 • 12:12PM

Even without rediscovering any long forgotten composers this year, Wexford Festival Opera's 64th season still delivers its usual assortment of intriguing rarities. This autumn's mix features works by a largely neglected composer, a misunderstood one and a figure remembered mainly for a single hit. In that order the operas are Ferdinand Hérold's *Le Pré aux clercs*, Frederick Delius's



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### Koanga and Pietro Mascagni's Guglielmo Ratcliff.

Perhaps the highlight is Koanga, the second of Delius's American operas and a piece surely inspired by his sojourn as an orange grower in Florida and the secret interracial love affair he is said to have experienced there. Set on a Southern plantation, it tells how the African prince Koanga, sold into slavery and prevented from marrying the mulatto maid Palmyra, invokes voodoo magic to recapture his lost identity and place a curse on the plantation.

A difficult period piece to bring off, its challenges are strongly yet sensitively met by the Polish-born director Michael Gieleta and his mainly South African production team. James Macnamara's white-box set incorporates splashes of plantation colour and a blue-beaded mosaic, and Boyzie Cekwana's choreography supplies the necessary vitality.

Though Koanga is dramatically flawed, it is musically fascinating. Composed in the 1890s, and thus anticipating Gershwin's Porgy and Bess by four decades, its rich choruses even involve banjo accompaniment and the score is sultry and luscious, full of the composer's trademark rapture. Stephen Barlow conducts with flexibility and warmth. The American baritone Norman Garrett sings the title role charismatically, but the South African soprano Nozuko Teto steals the show with the bright vibrancy of her tone.



CREDIT: CLIVE BARDA

Some notable casting distinguishes Guglielmo Ratcliff, too, not least the Sicilian tenor Angelo Villari in the title role, exciting in a stentorian sort of way. This almost unsingable part was turned down before the opera's 1895 premiere by Verdi's first Otello, Francesco Tamagno. But subtlety is hardly called for in this Heine-based opera — Mascagni's first, written before Cavalleria rusticana — with a Scottish setting and enough bloodshed to make Lucia di Lammermoor look like a highland picnic.

Despite the high gothic gore factor, the production by Fabio Ceresa (with designers Fabio Ceresa and Tiziano Santi) looks superbly stylish all in white, ivory and silver. The soprano Mariangela Sicilia (as Maria MacGregor, whose rejection of Ratcliff sets him on his vengeful path) and baritone David Stout

4  
5

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bring welcome nuance in the vocal department, and Francesco Cilluffo conducts Mascagni's overheated score with absolute conviction.



**Koanga runs on 27, 30 October; Guglielmo Ratcliff on 28, 31 October 2015, and will be broadcast live from Wexford on BBC Radio 3 from 19.45 on Saturday October 31. [www.wexfordopera.com](http://www.wexfordopera.com).**





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