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Koanga at National Opera House, Wexford

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Behind a Georgian terrace in a small fishing town in Ireland something extraordinary happens every October. There are clues on every street in Wexford, sheet music in the shop windows. Walk into the National Opera House and you'll find locals and visitors from North America, the UK and mainland Europe, all dressed up to the nines and eager to hear the operas that other companies tend not to do. Some are forgotten masterpieces (Foroni's *Cristina, regina di Svezia*). Some have been rightly consigned to obscurity (Mariotte's *Salomé*). Some are works in which music of fitful beauty is hampered by an awkward libretto, such as Delius's *Koanga*, which opened the 64th festival.

Plantation spirituals and music of the dawn, dusk and night weave through an opera in which the hero and heroine are never allowed a love duet, and in which slavery, with all its barbarity, is made touristic. Voodoo spirits are summoned in the language of the Edwardian potboiler, while love is expressed as a form of enjoyable crucifixion.

Though Delius took care to reflect the complex racial strata of antebellum Louisiana, the black and mixed-race characters are inevitably objectified. *Koanga* is therefore a serious challenge to its producer, and even more so to its two leads, the American baritone Norman Garrett (*Koanga*) and the South African soprano Nozuko Teto (*Palmyra*), both singing with fierce engagement and incisive, electric tones in Michael Gioleta's production.

Kinetic choreography and delicate imagery drawn from Ubele beading conjure the Africa from which *Koanga* has been stolen. In Louisiana, Jeff Gwaltney swaggers bullishly as the sadistic overseer Simon Perez, while Aubrey Allicock doubles powerfully as Uncle Joe and Rangwan. There is exquisite playing from the orchestra under the conductor Stephen Barlow, the veiled strings, humid flute and melancholy cor anglais more evocative of the Everglades than the shadowy vegetation of Seán O'Riordan's projections.

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