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Opera review: Koanga, Wexford Festival Opera



Saturday, October 24, 2015

Cathy Desmond



The 64th Wexford Festival Opera opened with *Koanga*, a rarely heard work by English composer Frederick Delius considered to be the first opera based on African American sources.

The composer's interest in American music was sparked when he was dispatched to Florida to manage his family's orange plantation. There, Delius became enchanted by the strains of spirituals sung by the

plantation slaves.

One of the most appealing elements of this production was the beautiful Foster like choruses, complete with on stage banjos magnificently delivered by the Festival Chorus.

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Director, Michael Gieleta, back in Wexford after his success with Stokowski's Maria in 2011, has assembled an impressive cast. Tall and imposing, Texan tenor Norman Garrett oozed charisma in the title role opposite a graceful, clear voiced South African soprano, Nozuko Teto as Palmyra. It was also good to hear Irish mezzo Kate Allen back on the Wexford stage as Clotilda.

The drama was attractively framed in simple and elegant sets. Designer, James McNamara, places the action in a blank canvas box with clever use of Seán O Riordan's projected images. Particularly lovely is the image of a beaded seascape that frames Koanga's entrance and striking illuminated orbs depicting sun and moon.

It does seem a little odd at first that the black plantation slaves are white and not that clearly distinguishable from the plantation owners gathering in the opening scene, all dressed in neutral shades. A quartet of African dancers added to the stylish visuals.

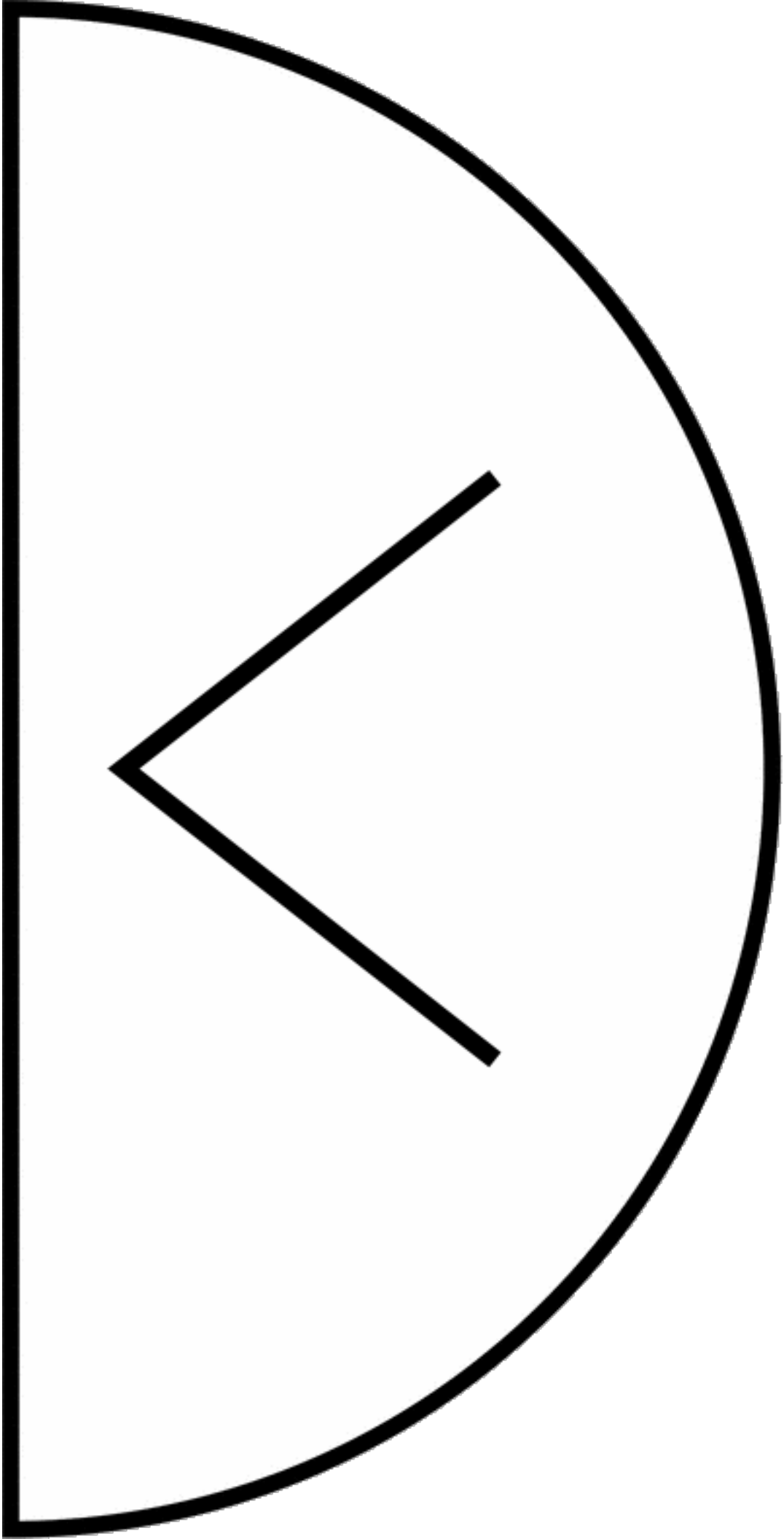
The plot has plenty of elements to make a good drama. It centres on a proud African prince sold into slavery in Louisiana who invokes voodoo in revenge on his masters for the abduction of his bride.

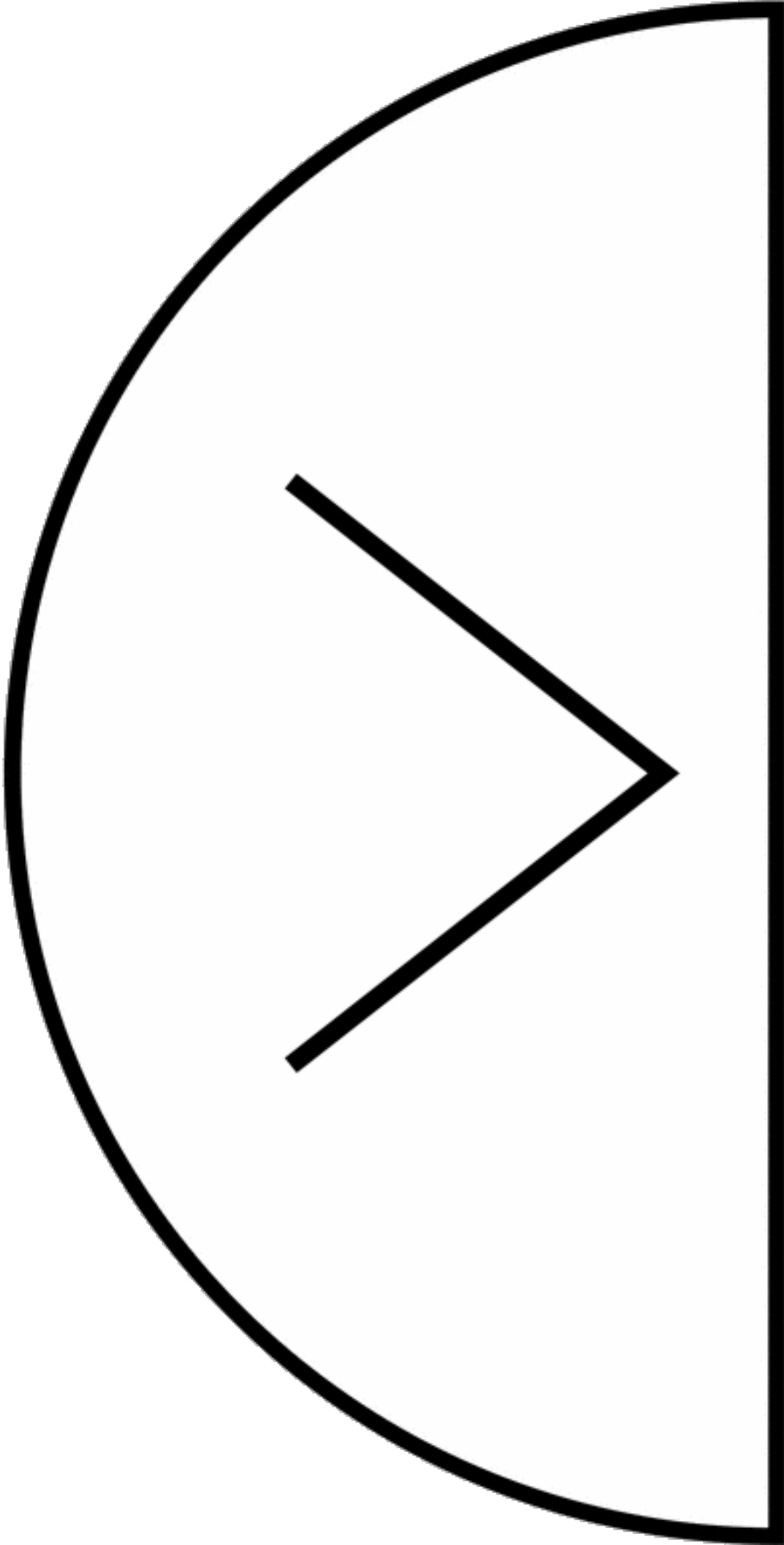
Koanga is torn between being true to his roots and his love for Palmyra which demands he conforms to the status quo. However, the plot doesn't thicken. A clunky libretto and poor pacing spills the dramatic tension and there is little to make you gasp or weep.

There was nothing lacking in colour and pace in the pit. Under the baton of Stephen Barlow, the shimmering harmonies and pulsating rhumbas of the lush late Romantic score were reminiscent of early cinematic soundtracks. The music was gorgeous and best demonstrated why the festival team receive more requests to perform Koanga than any other opera. Wexford did Delius proud.

- Further performances Oct 24, 27, 30. See www.wexfordopera.com

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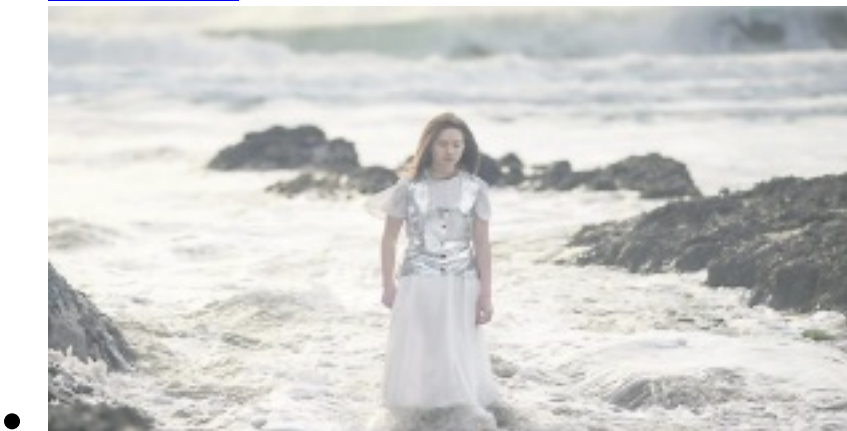
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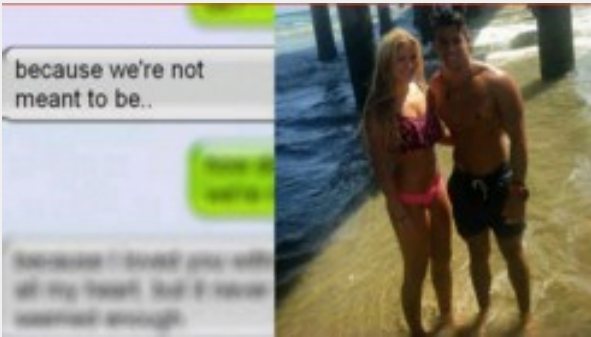
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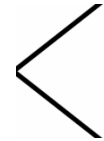
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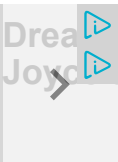
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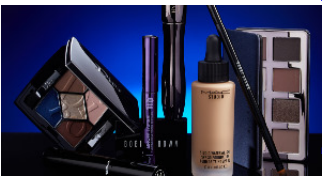
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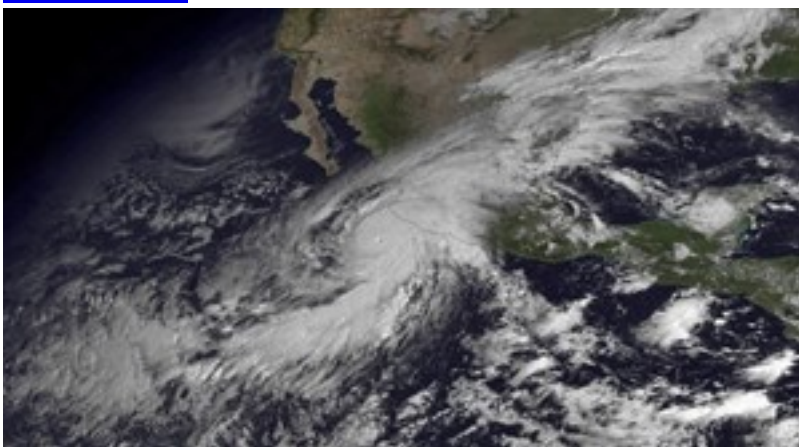
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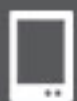
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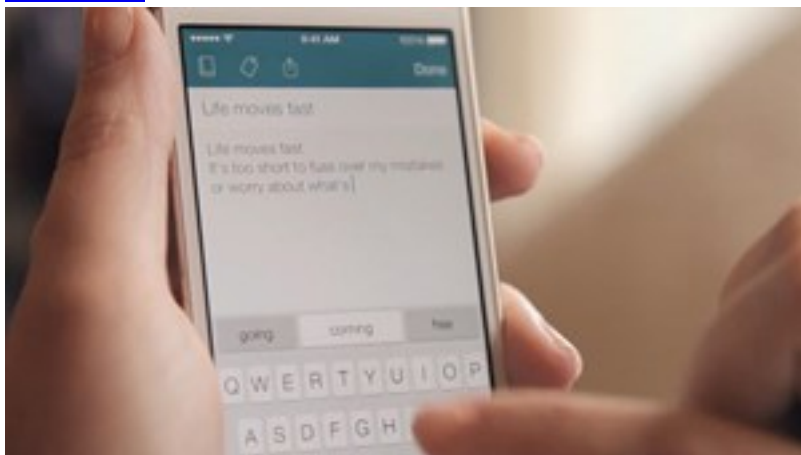
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