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'Prince of Players' score soars, while libretto is a letdown

By Joseph Campana | March 7, 2016



Photo: Marie D. De Jesus, Staff



Ben Edquist, plays the lead role Edward Kynaston, a famed actor in England in the 1700s whose career is abruptly stopped when the king issues a decree prohibiting men from playing women in stage roles. Armenian soprano Mane Galoyan will sing Margaret Hughes. The Houston Grand Opera (HGO) will present Prince of

A night at the opera can leave us speechless or it can send us to our feet shouting "Bravo!" At the close of the Houston Grand Opera world premiere of Carlisle Floyd's "Prince of Players," it was all leaping and shouting.

Floyd not only co-founded the Houston Grand Opera Studio, but this great

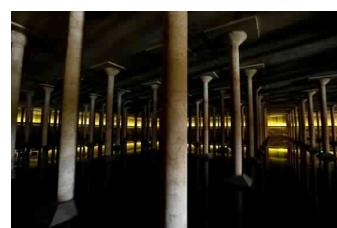
American treasure has now premiered his fifth work for Houston Grand Opera just shy of his 90th birthday. That's plenty to celebrate. But the true achievement of "Prince of Players" is a beautifully realized production of an ambitious commission with an electrifying score stirringly conducted by Patrick Summers.

From its opening moments, "Prince of Players" resounds with tonal unease, surreptitious woodwinds and warning strings. And in mere seconds, Floyd conveys that, in spite of some fun and flirtation to come, we are in the presence of a sea-change, and no one will remain unscathed. The marvel of Floyd is his attention to moments great and small. Some of the most compelling passages come seemingly between scenes or in the absence of voice - as an actor silently practices his gestures or as the court eerily processes before their king.

"Prince of Players" treats the life of Edward Kynaston, last of the great male actors of female roles on the 17th-century English stage. It's easy to forget that Shakespeare's great women were originally played by boys and men until Charles II reopened the theaters and made way for the first professional actresses.

Misogyny and sexual anxiety justified barring women from the stage, but the boy actors who supplanted them were extraordinary. Herein lies the pathos of "Prince of Players": To correct a wrong is also to destroy a world. Thus, while everything from Shakespearean comedy to "Some Like It Hot" conditions us to find hilarity in cross-dressing plots, with the snap of his fingers, Charles II

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renders Kynaston obsolete and well-nigh tragic.



Unzipped: Living alone, downtown

Action begins in a darkened theater as Kynaston triumphs in the part of Desdemona to the marvel of his viewers, who clamor for more. Little does he know his own tragic fate

awaits. Ben Edquist makes for a marvelous Kynaston, his voice rich and sure, his acting eminently up to portraying a player reflecting melancholically on a disappearing world.

Mane Galoyan manages less successfully the admittedly tricky vocal part of Margaret Hughes, one-time dresser and confidante to Kynaston and aspiring actress who becomes his rival and replacement as Desdemona. But Federico De Michelis is a knockout, perhaps the best voice on the stage, as actor and manager Thomas Betterton.

Shoko Kambara sets a high-water mark for elegant restraint in his set design with simple racks of dangling costumes or stage curtains, a spare chandelier and an imposing chair conveying just enough grandeur. A fluidly rotating stage makes for seamless transitions and easy pace. Gregory Gale's costumes are sumptuously spectacular, suiting the historical moment without the stuffy feel of a costume drama.

But this compelling score and subject find themselves let down by a libretto based on Jeffrey Hatcher's "Compleat Female Stage Beauty," which premiered in 1999 and shows its age. Even the 2004 film version, "Stage Beauty," feels as out of step with the sexual paradigm shifts of either the 1660s or the 2010s, as does "Prince of Players."

Early on, two female fans want to verify that the greatest player of female parts of their era has appropriate male body parts. Megan Mikailovna Samarin and Puruem Jo marvelously voice these parts, the women sometimes starting and stopping one another's sentences, sometimes singing together.

But "Prince of Players" makes it too easy to giggle about body parts when far more serious things are afoot. Kynaston jokes, too, but he's viciously groped by the all-too curious all too often. One of those gropers, who later arranges for Kynaston to be beaten nearly to death, spits homophobic slurs, which oddly drew laughter from the audience. Later, an

Birthdays: May 9

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unemployed Kynaston plays "Lusty Louise" in a tawdry tavern, singing a bawdy ballad about an anatomically incomplete husband. The ballad was more irresistible to the audience than the pathos of Kynaston's degradation.

Equally disappointing are scenes between Kynaston and his male lover, George Villiers. They were awkwardly performed and swiftly hid off stage. How much more daring was *Hatcher*, who features the lovers having sex on the bed in which Othello strangles Desdemona while Kynaston sports a blond wig. It seems odd in 2016 to encounter such difficulties.

"Prince of Players" may not innovate in these respects. But Floyd contemplates just what it is that has drawn us to drama for millennia.

"What a world is the stage, and someday I'll belong to it," Peg sings early on.

Theater salves the pain of longing, offering the brief magic that lets us believe we are what we will be, not merely what others will have us be.