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Playing Prince or Princess at the Florentine Opera

BY RICK WALTERS OCT. 15, 2018 10:04 A.M.

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Carlisle Floyd is best known for his opera *Susannah* (1956). His twelfth opera was premiered at Houston Grand Opera in 2016 when the composer was 89, and with sets and costumes from that original production *Prince of Players* was performed this weekend at Florentine Opera.

The opera is based on Jeffrey Hatcher's play *Compleat Female Stage Beauty*, which was adapted for the 2004 film *Stage Beauty*. The libretto by the composer concerns London actor Edward Kynaston (1640-1706), who specialized in playing female roles until King Charles II decreed that women should appear on the stage. Kynaston is left without a livelihood. He coaches his former dresser, Margaret (Peg) Hughes, and by the end of the opera is playing Othello to her Desdemona.

The opera seems to want to comment on gender roles and sexual identity, with Kynaston first in a clandestine relationship with a nobleman (an obvious missed opportunity for a male/male love duet), then later with Peg Hughes. But the dramatic issues remain without fine points. There wasn't much logic to Kynaston saying he would never play a man onstage, only to do so without explanation, and suddenly in a "naturalistic" style so different from the stylized acting for which he was renown.

Floyd succeeds where many opera composers fail with word settings, vocal writing, and orchestrations which don't overwhelm the singing. The score is pleasant enough, but most of it is rather prosaic and undistinguished. I don't know why any opera composer

would want to tackle setting to music the final scene of *Othello*, with Giuseppe Verdi's master work casting such a long shadow over it.

The Sunday afternoon performance at Uihlein Hall made the best case for the piece. The simple, suitable sets by Shoko Kambara centered on a platform that was moved around, colored by the handsome period costumes by Gregory Gale. As Kynaston baritone Keith Phares was better than good as a singer and actor. Soprano Kate Royal made as much as she could of Margaret, giving graceful arch to phrases. Exciting sounds came from tenors Chad Shelton (King Charles II) and Vale Rideout (Villiers).

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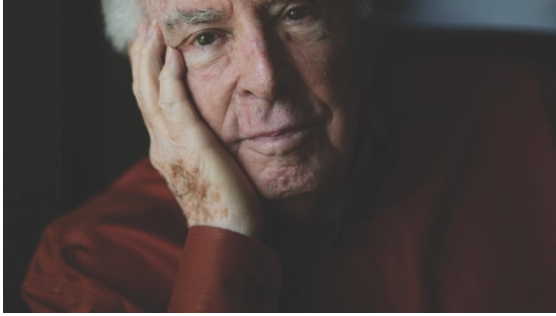


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