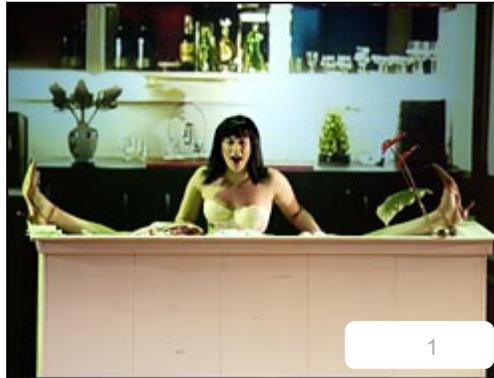


Extreme Makeover

BY KYLE GANN

TUESDAY, OCTOBER 19, 2004 AT 4 A.M.



Jasmin Besig performs in *Buwalsky*, at NYU's Skirball Center.

photo: Opera Buwalsky

Buwalsky, like *Wozzeck* in Berg's opera, is a mope, a nobody, a minor functionary snubbed by his superiors. Like *Wozzeck*, he's in love with a woman who's in love with someone else. As with *Wozzeck*, his jealousy drives him to murder. But there are a couple of big differences. One is that, though *Buwalsky*'s tormentors aptly call him "dogface," he has big, sensuous hands that for some reason no woman can resist once she's seen them. The other is that *Buwalsky* has fallen in with characters trapped in a 24-hour-a-day reality TV show. For no better reason than that a woman called out, "Will nobody help me?" and he came, he's turned into an unwitting TV star.

Just as Mikel Rouse's 1996 *Dennis Cleveland* fused opera with the TV talk show, *Buwalsky*, by composer Mel Marvin and librettist Jonathan Levi, brings reality TV into the world of opera. (I saw the New York premiere October 2 at NYU's Skirball Center.) The TV show is curious: Its stars, Lada and her lover Franco, are on the lam for having killed a rich industrialist, yet they never escape the cameras. And in fact, any character in the opera who wants to be apprised of the whereabouts of his or her nemeses need only click the screen on with a remote, and there they are. *Real* reality TV should be so helpful.

Thus there were two planes of reality in *Buwalsky*: the video screen behind the singers, in which we watched segments from the all-day TV show *Lada*, and the live-actor action that took place in front of the screen. The Inspector (played by Wil van der Meer) hunts after Lada (Klara

Uleman) and Franco (Charles Alves da Cruz), and apprehends Lada when dogs track her down. Buwalsky (Peter Michailov), a faithful *Lada* watcher, is already in love with her when he rushes to save her from the Inspector's clutches. When Lada sees on TV that the Inspector is capturing Franco, she commands Buwalsky, if he loves her, to go shoot the Inspector—but Franco has disguised himself as the Inspector, and Buwalsky shoots the wrong man.

This was not *Wozzeck*'s atmosphere of tragedy: *Buwalsky* was hip, self-conscious, postmodern by intent, often tongue-in-cheek. The music for the video sequences was prerecorded, that for the live singers played by an eight-member pit band of brass, strings, and percussion (Jan van Maanen conducting), and segues between the two were pulled off cleverly. Marvin underlaid much of the action with a film noir score of 1950s spy-music clichés, angular lines punched out by the saxophone over tempestuous grooves. He had the style down, and the vocal lines were admirably set for maximum communicability, even if the singers were punishingly forced to compete with saxophone and trombone.

Video production by Patricia Boogaart was interestingly continental—American-style TV would have flattened the illusion—and the singers were well cast. Uleman as Lada had a tremendously more powerful voice than her delicate face led you to expect; van der Meer was intended as a stock character and managed more depth; and Michailov was expressively inarticulate, even though his unaltered hands looked too quotidian to validate the fuss made over them in the libretto. What the opera needed, though, was a breadth of musical vocabulary to match its theatrical conceit. Aside from film noir references, Marvin tends to write in a well-orchestrated, propulsive idiom of monochromatic atonality. In one scene Buwalsky and Lada escaped to the countryside, where they pulled carrots out of the earth and shared them with a friendly horse; charmingly funny, this drew appreciative titters, but the background music incongruously shuddered on in Schoenbergian angst. It's refreshingly postclassical to see an opera that can laugh at itself—but the music needs to be in on the joke.

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