

Our National Folk Opera

SUSANNAH

Chicago Opera Theater
at the Athenaeum Theatre
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By Kyle Gann

All questions of merit aside, it is American operas whose speech rhythms, social conventions, and political assumptions fall most easily and naturally on the ears and understandings of American audiences. Yet performances of American operas are rare, and the enthusiast dependent on recordings is faced with a meager and desultory selection of offerings that suggest that almost all American operas have been turgid, dramatically unviable, or downright amateurish. In Chicago, it has been the Chicago Opera Theater that has single-handedly given the lie to this unfortunate notion. With an uncanny eye for casting, wise selection of musicians, and a refreshingly straightforward approach, they showed us a year ago that *The Crucible* was indeed dramatically powerful; two years ago, that humor and philosophy combined to make *The Mother of Us All* a brilliant and entertaining political allegory for our century; and now in this enchanting new production they've shown us the depths of the American psyche tapped by Carlisle Floyd's *Susannah*.

Loosely inspired by, rather than based on, the apocryphal biblical book *The History of Susanna*, Floyd's *Susannah* is the story of a young, ingenuous, flirtatious Tennessee Valley girl destroyed by the lust she unwittingly arouses in the community's church elders. Unfairly accused of publicly exposing herself, then cruelly ostracized by highly religious neighbors eager

to believe the worst, Susannah is finally seduced by a fire-and-brimstone-spouting preacher who pretends to be concerned only for her soul. Its Semitic origins notwithstanding, the story depends on archetypes and convictions deeply embedded in our American national mythology since the last century: forcibly lost innocence, the tyranny of mob opinion, Victorian sexual attitudes, the sublimation of male lust, all topped with that peculiarly southern American character, the overzealous preacher whose hypocritical motives are all too transparent. Czechoslovakia has its *Bartered Bride*, Germany has its *Freischütz*, and *Susannah* is, more than any other work, the American *Volksoper*—our national folk opera.

The music, patterned alternately after folk songs and rural hymnody, bears out that spirit as well. In *The Crucible*, composer Robert Ward attempted with limited success to effect a compromise between the demands of modernism and those of operatic tradition, but in 1954 Floyd solved the problem by sidestepping it. Scorning the sophistication of a through-composed structure, he fashioned *Susannah* out of a virtual pastiche of extended arias, but joined them with such a smooth melodic flow that the seams are hardly noticeable. Need some dramatic tension? Easy: just underlay the quasi folk songs with a dissonant accompaniment. It's simplistic almost past the point of conservatism, but it works. (Make a note of that: when writing music for the stage, to attempt less is to achieve more.) Whether Floyd's half dozen or so other operas work as well is a question that no record label or local opera company seems willing to answer.

For better or worse, the movies have trained us to expect that

operatic singers will *look* like the characters whose roles they are playing. Major opera houses routinely ignore this requirement, but Chicago Opera Theater satisfies it with laudable scrupulousness. The casting of *Susannah* was a triumph of characterization, achieved without any apparent sacrifice of singing ability. Not a single visual element sinned against the believability of the whole, and Marsha LeBoeuf's exquisitely detailed costumes conjured up a southern, lower-class atmosphere for whose authenticity I will gladly vouch to northern nonbelievers. From *Susannah*'s unthinking coquettishness to Reverend Blitch's histrionic benedictions to Elder Gleaton's curmudgeonly sanctimony, every gesture contributed to a realism that rendered unnecessary the suspension of disbelief operas usually demand of American audiences.

Gracing the title role, soprano Gloria Capone showed that she has continued to mature in her acting abilities, which were tremendous to begin with. She changed from an innocent, playful girl to an embittered and tragically disillusioned woman gradually and by the most imperceptibly small degrees, projecting credibility at every step. She defined her role with a breadth that gave her room to move around within it, and you could tell that she has fun with the spontaneous shaping of every phrase and even every word; she is a refreshingly natural talent, her enchantment always a pleasure to fall prey to, as her bright, silken voice is to listen to.

Even given a satisfying talent in that role, though, the opera still hinges on whether the Reverend Olin Blitch can project enough intensity to make his hypnosis of the community and his seduction of *Susannah* believable. Kenneth

Bell possessed all the required charisma and some to spare, not to mention a booming, pulpit-pounding preacher's bass voice capable of dominating hectic crowd scenes. The most delicate and problematic point of the plot is the junction of scenes three and four of act two: *Susannah*'s final demoralization at Blitch's hands and his realization, against expectations, of his guilt. Forcefully contrasting their antagonistic emotions, Capone and Bell veered their way through this trouble spot with admirable psychological honesty.

As for the other man in *Susannah*'s life, Kent Hall played her drunken brother Sam with a mild-mannered gentleness that seemed incongruous at first, but he fleshed out his conception of the role into

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an utterly convincing character: a loner too sensitive to hold his own in that hard-hearted community. Though hard put at times to match the fluidity of Capone's soprano in duets, he rose to the occasion in the most dramatic moments to reveal a powerful and sturdy upper tenor register. To the role of Little Bat, the half-wit who loves *Susannah* and is tricked into denouncing her, Jon David Gruett brought the same half-humorous timidity that had made his Jo the Loiterer a touching facet of *The Mother of Us All*.

Some very fine singers were relegated to minor roles, and none finer

than Gweneth Bean. As Mrs. Ott, she had only a few solo lines, but listen for them: they evince a talent that goes beyond mere vocal production, and you could almost wring pure emotion out of her phrases like water out of a soaked towel. Someone should write an opera just as a vehicle for that passionately gentle voice. Catherine Stoltz, Diane Ragains, and Gene Marie Callahan maintained very individual variations on the "old biddy you love to hate" character, while Ralph Klapis, Paul Gudas (the irascible Elder Gleaton mentioned before), Jerome Padorr, and William Walker were hilariously contrasted as the lascivious and self-righteous church elders. Their hysterics during the revival meeting may strike jaded northern sensibilities as overacting, but I've seen the real thing in rural Texas and will attest to their veracity. All these elements were confidently welded together by conductor Steven Larsen, who demonstrated once again that he has a fine feel for American music, both classical and vernacular. He flowed easily with the spontaneity of Gloria Capone's phrasing with no loss of rhythmic precision, and he managed a good sonic blend from the orchestra in a score whose orchestration is probably its weakest point.

The unity of artistic vision that artistic director Alan Stone brought out of *The Crucible* and *The Mother of Us All* vividly characterizes *Susannah* as well. From the first note to the last the production breathes an atmosphere of America's rural and religious roots that will tug on many a subconscious heartstring even as it exposes the horrific side of that past. *Susannah* runs through this Sunday; go see it. This is the way opera should be performed: credibly, and as theater.