

Sorrel Hays's opera *The Glass Woman* portrays six decades in the life of Anna Safley Houston (1876-1951), an antique dealer whose life's collection of precious glass objects is displayed in a museum dedicated to her memory in Chattanooga, Tennessee. The opera isn't finished yet; its nine completed scenes were presented August 1 at the Ubu Repertory Theater. The production was largely funded by Opera America, a laudable organization dedicated to the rejuvenation of contemporary opera through creating workshops, bringing composers and librettists together, and commissioning new operas for usually regional companies. With their help, *The Glass Woman* was developed through a collaboration between New York's music theater group Encompass and the Chattanooga Symphony and Opera Association. Lotta people to thank here, and the work's not even done yet.

Memphis-born New York resident Sorrel Hays, who used to perform as Doris Hays, is probably known to you, if at all, as a pianist concentrating on the avant-garde; her fiery performances of works by Cowell, Ornstein, Feldman, herself, and others are recorded on Finnadar. As a composer she's worked widely in electronics, multimedia, and video, so it was a change of pace that *The Glass Woman* contained nothing in the way of an experimental impulse (so far, that is; further electronic portions are planned). Instead, it fit comfortably into an older, sturdy American folk-opera tradition well established in regional theaters, but still awaiting its just due from the big companies.

The in-progress production left story gaps to be filled in, but the opera traces "Annie" through her remarkable series of nine husbands who try to limit her horizon and thwart her mission in life. "Husbands are like olives," she sings at last to an increasingly scandalized community; "after you get the first one out, the others come easily." The final scene finds her in

Sorrel Hays / Philip Glass

Opera Glasses

BY KYLE GANN

heaven, happily communing with the shades of other women museum-founders such as Peggy Guggenheim and Getrude Vanderbilt Whitney. Hays wrote the lyrics along with Sally Ordway, and the text-setting is so naturally done that I didn't think about it until afterwards. The production, adequately accompanied (for now) by piano, synthesizer, and percussion, made a strong impact due to several excellent singers, notably Terri Hoover, who sang the young Annie; her lithe voice, rich yet innocent tone, and wonderfully expressive acting brought Marni Nixon to mind. Bass baritone Paul Berkolds was equally impressive as the out-cast plumber Annie married twice (husband numbers three and five), and mezzosoprano Meredyth Rawlins made a splash as home remedy-proffering Granny.

While not noticeably derivative, *Glass Woman* has much in common, even beyond its mild tonal idiom, with a number of American operas: its theme of a young woman dreaming about a world outside her rural background (Copland's *The Tender Land*), its inventive grounding of musical form in rural hymnody and folk-

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song (Robert Ward's *The Crucible*, Carlisle Floyd's *Susannah*), its confrontation between an embittered woman and society (*Susannah*, Virgil Thomson's *The Mother of Us All*, and Douglas Moore's *Carrie Nation*). In fact, except for those by minimalists, few major American operas are *not* centered around a woman



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Hays is serious if not fashionable.

fighting the limitations society has placed on her; that's virtually our national operatic myth. It's high time a work in that vein was written by a woman, and the future of this one is worth keeping an ear out for.

If musically conservative, *The Glass Woman* was 150 times as enjoyable as the *Glass House* heard two weeks earlier at Alice Tully Hall (July 14 through 16 as part of Serious Fun!). Philip Glass's *Fall*

of the *House of Usher*, to a flat libretto by Arthur Yorinks, started with a Poe story that doesn't translate easily to a post-Freudian age anyway; but rather than search for a solution, Glass underlaid the whole with an eternally undulating interval of a minor third, as if preparing any minute to break into the theme from *Rawhide*. The result, supposed to be pretentiously expressionistic, was rife with unintended comedy, including a near-palindromic climax that fell with a dull thud: "duh-dee-duh-dee-duh-dee-duh-dee [pause] 'Madeline [intoned on one note]... is dead' [pause] duh-dee-duh-dee-duh-dee-duh-dee..." As if to explain, Glass gave away the key to this hack-work's motivation in doodling-for-dollars solfège, spelling out "dough me, dough me, dough me." Afterward I overheard a woman shout my sentiments at her companion: "I can't believe somebody invested money to put that onstage—and that you dragged me to it!"

The irritating thing is, within a long stone's throw of Lincoln Center must live 100 composers who could have written a better opera than *Usher*, and the only reason to include the damn thing was Glass's crowd-drawing name. "It'll fill the house, it'll fill the house"—one can almost hear the murmur of that unholy mantra falling from the lips of dozens of presenters as an excuse to play it safe. Music critters (as my four-year-old son calls members of my profession) have no more worthy task than to convince audiences that risks pay off: that Hays's fledgling work is a better bet *even* if she's a woman, *even* if they've never heard of her, than these assembly-line famous-name extravaganzas that seem to have no *artistic* impulse behind them whatsoever. We badly need presenters with enough integrity and alternative marketing savvy to break the back of this art-desecrating star system. Opera America, by investing time, resources, and faith in artists more serious than fashionable, is taking brave steps in that direction. ■

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