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Opera: 'Anna Karenina'

Tolstoy's famed novel 'Anna Karenina' comes to full emotional life in new Opera San José production.

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by Guest Writers on Sep 15, 2010 A A A 0 Comments Email Share 17 0



STAR TURN :Jouvanca Jean-Baptiste delivered a stirring performance as 'Anna Karenina' on Sunday.

EITHER I'M dreaming, or Sunday's performance of David Carlson's Anna Karenina was the best thing that ever happened at [Opera San José](#).

The West Coast premiere revealed an extraordinary symphonic score that its composer succeeded in subordinating to the great Tolstoy narrative and the richly complex characters destined for both doom and redemption. Moreover, this new production raised company standards across the board.

As Tolstoy's novel explores, and develops, a universe of human emotions in conflict, so Carlson's music, along with Brad Dalton's stage direction and Steven C. Kemp's set design, miraculously holds them all in balance and clarity. Librettist Colin Graham has argued that no previous version on film or in music does justice to Tolstoy's characters and motives.

In this "divine comedy," all players are controlled by forces larger than any one of them, the all-too-familiar social rules that remain intolerant and intransigent when challenged by passions of the heart. In the end, individual forgiveness and love itself have the last word. But everyone pays a price, no one more dearly than the title character.

And with so much riding on that character, the company's choice to cast Jouvanca Jean-Baptiste as Anna was a huge roll of the dice (she alternates in the role with Jasmina Halimic). Not that the soprano was short of the right stuff, but that she had never before taken a big operatic role, much less the starring one. Her performance, vocally and dramatically, rocked the California Theatre. After the Sunday matinee, conductor Stewart Robertson—on the podium for every performance since the opera's Miami premiere—described Jean-Baptiste as "fearless."

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This was no walk in the park, however, given Carlson's music, rhythmically mercurial, harmonically sumptuous and loaded with long-limbed melodies and ensembles (but not so many tunes to take home on first hearing). Opulently orchestrated, the score remains a constant presence, leaving the musicians with few opportunities to breathe deeply or relax their concentration.

Finding Carlson's musical fingerprints is a further challenge to the first-time listener, given the many subtle



hints and echoes of Shostakovich, Prokofiev, Janáček and Rachmaninoff—as if intended to flatter the story’s Russian sensibility with a Slavic-tinted sound world. (In the after-performance Q&A with lingering audience members, Carlson answered a question about his use of bells, describing cutting tubular bells short so as to imitate the out-of-tune bells of St. Petersburg’s historic basilica.)

Anna’s heart is torn between her coolly distant husband, Alexei Karenin (Isaiah Musik-Ayala), and her passionate lover, Alexei Vronsky (Torlef Borsting). Her brother, Stiva Oblansky (Michael Mendelsohn), and his wife, Dolly (Tori Grayum), have reconciled after his outside affair. Dolly’s sister, Kitty (Khorl Dastoor), has spurned the advances of Konstantin Levin (Alexander Boyer) while becoming infatuated with the charming Vronsky. (Levin is regarded as Tolstoy’s self-portrait, a man preoccupied in search of the meaning of life.)

Along with Kent Dorsey’s superb lighting, Kemp’s set designs crucially used drops within a wide-open stage to keep clear the rapid scene changes called for by the libretto. Especially effective was a mirrored panel that doubled ballroom mazurka dancers and made possible, and most effective, a solo scene by Jean-Baptiste with her back to the audience. The scene of Vronsky’s horse race, the orchestra running like the fillies, with all principals facing the track (the audience) was a masterstroke of imagination. Props were used as metaphors, as was a trapdoor, for suicide under a train, at the outset, and the bright white light of a railroad engine to mask Anna’s own suicide.

For this production, Carlson added an entirely new scene: the intoxicated Vronsky showing up in Anna’s bedroom to consummate their forbidden love. The orchestra, energized under Robertson’s authoritative direction—he has premiered two other Carlson operas to acclaim—displayed new confidence and startling flexibility.

Despite any last-minute jitters—there were few apparent—this cast acquitted itself handsomely. By all appearances, this was an expensive production to mount, and generously supported by the Carol Franc Buck Foundation. Kudos, Opera San José!

Anna Karenina

Through Sept. 26
California Theatre, San Jose

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