A New Doctor Atomic Partners with Mother Nature to Powerful Effect

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SANTA FE, NM—As with any great tragedy, from the outset we already know the denouement of Doctor Atomic: The world’s first atomic bomb will be successfully detonated in the New Mexican desert at dawn on July 16, 1945—a prelude to the atrocities of its use less than a month later on Hiroshima and Nagasaki. Yet the suspense of the countdown is sustained and intensified by John Adams’s masterful score to a dramatic pitch that is rare in contemporary opera. Doctor Atomic houses in on the psychological and moral turmoil unleashed by the experiment, while nature’s unpredictable force is pitted against humanity’s attempt to manipulate it.

That force is abundantly dramatized in the form of a fierce thunderstorm on the eve of the test explosion. But the tension in Santa Fe Opera’s new production was further reinforced by the prolonged intrusion of a real-time storm lasting for much of the first act (during the performance on August 2). As a prelude to the opera proper, a multi-generational group from the local Teigsaw, Santa Clara, and San Ildefonso Pueblos presented a Corn Dance onstage, against the open-air backdrop of mountains and high desert landscape—(choreographed by Emily Johnson) provided gestural commentary.

Uncannily timed with the start of the opera, all hell broke loose from the heavens: not the typical intense-but-soon-spent high desert monsoon, but nearly 50 minutes of torrential downpour, accompanied by lightning and furious thunder, all timed as if in direct response to the many weather references in the libretto. At one point, when an idealistic young colleague advocates a remote demonstration of the bomb’s power instead of using it on people, the project leader J. Robert Oppenheimer dismisses his humanitarianism by asking: “What if it’s a dud?” A hair-raising thunderclap preceded his equivocation, triggering an outburst of nervous laughter from the audience.

Even apart from the outstanding qualities of the cast and musicians, the performance displayed a remarkable feat of concentration and split-second improvisation to keep it all running without interruption. The rain lashed sideways, floating upstage and forcing many of the string players to escape the pit for part of the first act to avoid having their instruments damaged by the water. Yet Matthew Aucoin continued conducting with tenacious energy and unslackened momentum, despite the “dampened” sound. By the culmination of the act, when the storm had calmed, everything was in place for Oppenheimer’s tour de force soliloquy to exert maximal impact: his aria “Batter my heart,” a setting of the John Donne sonnet from which the poetry-loving physicist derived the name “Trinity” for the bomb test site.

Peter Sellars, who directed Doctor Atomic’s world premiere production at San Francisco Opera in 2005, has emphasized Trinity’s tragic local implications in his new staging by incorporating “downwinders”—people from communities near test sites who have suffered cancers and other health impacts caused by radiation—as part of a silent counterpoint to the opera’s ongoing conflict over whether to carry through with the test. (Shockingly, downwinders from the Trinity test site are still fighting to be recognized for federal reparations under the Radiation Exposure Compensation Act.) It was profoundly moving to see their silent witness as the military head of the project, General Leslie Groves, refuses to evacuate the local population for fear of compromising the test’s secrecy.

Paradoxically, perhaps, this more local Doctor Atomic actually universalizes the opera’s concerns to a far greater extent than did Sellars’s initial staging—and certainly more than the misguided, poorly conceived production Penny Woolcock directed for the Met in 2008 (which has been the opera’s “face” for much of the public thanks to being disseminated in the HD broadcast and on DVD). Gabriel Barry’s costumes replace the 1945 attire and Oppenheimer’s signature porkpie hat with contemporary dress. David Gropman’s stripped-down set is dominated by the “gadget.” This time, however, it is not a replica of the original bomb but a giant, suspended steel sphere covered with reflective chrome—an abstract idol lit by James F. Ingalls’s ingenious design to reflect but also project from within surreal, nightmarish configurations that harmonize eerily with the libretto’s apocalyptic verse of Muriel Rukeyser and Baudelaire. Their poetry comprises a significant part of the libretto Sellars compiled from found sources, which also include declassified meeting minutes, wiretapped conversations, and scientific observations.

And more in tune with Adams’s harmonically dense and rhythmically intricate music, which pivots restlessly from one idea to the next, Sellars foregrounded the sense of parallel worlds, time zones, and sensibilities all unfolding simultaneously. The strictly linear time line of the scientific experiment became eclipsed by a kind of “eternal present”—just as in, say, the myth of Orpheus, the fateful moment of turning back to look reverberates with endless sorrow.

This was most memorably realized at the height of Act 2, before the final countdown, when the realms of Oppenheimer’s wife Kitty and her Tewa Indian housekeeper Pasqualita and the scientists intersect boundlessly, while the Pueblo dancers returned with their Corn Dance and still another ensemble of four dancers (choreographed by Emily Johnson) provided gestural commentary.

Aucoin’s pacing and fine ear for textual shaping emphasized the beguiling mystery inherent in Adams’s setting of scientific facts (as in “We surround the plutonium core” in Act 1). Instead of the standard binary opposition of modern science and ancient worldviews, his music suggests parallel ways of attempting to fathom nature and our relationship with it.

The cast was first-rate throughout, featuring long stretches of compelling ensemble work but also anchored by the in-depth portrayals of Ryan McKinny as Oppenheimer and Julia Bullock as Kitty. (Bullock also appears on
the excellent new recording on Nonesuch—the opera’s first studio recording, made in London last year and conducted by the composer.)

Both of them uncovered resonant depths as they coped with their respective crises—encapsulated in parallel "dark nights of the soul" at the end of Act 1 ("Batter my heart") and Kitty’s long solo at the top of Act 2, enriched by Bullock’s ecstatic, ravishing coloratura (“Easter Eve 1945”). And they developed a tangible chemistry of longing and unfulfilled hopes in their pivotal bedroom scene (“Am I in your light?”), its aching, sustained lines in brilliant contrast to the pointillist, pinpoint diffusions of rhythmic energy that tauten the countdowns.

As the nurturing Pasqualita—keeping the household under control while Kitty drowns herself in drink and worry—Meredith Arwady imparted a sense of ancestral wisdom with her darkly beautiful, cavernous alto. Andrew Harris was a forceful, sardonic Edward Teller, intellectual equal to and part-time nemesis of Oppenheimer. Benjamin Bliss presented a compelling ethical counterweight as Teller’s idealist, pacifism-inclined protégé, Robert Wilson, while Tim Mix, as the bullied meteorologist Frank Hubbard, delivered a plaintive account of his dream of falling (a cousin to Klinghoffer’s "gymnopédie" "Aria of the Falling Body").

Sellars’s vision encompasses a spectrum of beauty, despair, and awe, as the entire ensemble lies prostrate downstage during the climax—b ut all tethered to the realities of place, of physical interactions, of the body itself, including those bodies of the downwinders bearing traces of the atomic bomb test. In this context, an episode originally included as comic relief—in which General Groves (portrayed by the physically towering, vocally commanding bass-baritone Daniel Okulitch) explains struggles with his diet to Oppenheimer—acquired a darker undertone. The General’s self-conscious, humanizing awareness of the toll taken by all this stress is clearly set against his blatant indifference to the test’s consequences on fellow citizens—let alone the “enemy,” whose voice is given the last word (from the prerecorded sounds Adams uses to frame his score): a Japanese woman pleading for water.

Top photo: Ben Bliss as Robert Wilson

Photos by Ken Howard for Santa Fe Opera

Sellars’s ‘spectrum of beauty, despair, and awe, as the entire ensemble lies prostrate downstage during the climax.’

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