

Opera sketches a drunken blur of Jack London

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In the opera "Every Man Jack," which had its world premiere Saturday night at Sonoma State University in Rohnert Park, the writer Jack London reels about the stage in an alcoholic stupor. The room spins, voices rise up and fade into the fog, and the proceedings are punctuated by sudden, all-too-brief episodes of blinding clarity.

The listener is apt to know just how he feels.

That sense of being immersed in a boozy haze is very much the point of this two-hour musical bender, a collaboration between composer Libby Larsen and librettist Philip Littell. In sketching the life of one of Northern California's best-known writers, the two have adopted an artistic approach we might call "alcoholic realism."

It's not enough for London to stagger through life with a drink in his hand, focusing either dimly or with alarming precision on the events surrounding him. Larsen and Littell contrive for the audience to stagger along with him.

So the music bleeds endlessly from snatches of music hall ballads to Chinese melodies to waltz tunes, and from Spike Jones sound effects to luxuriant operatic strains. A quartet of supporting singers switches characters with dizzying fluidity. Five minutes at a time is about the maximum for having some clear idea what's happening, before the opera does another quick sidestep and plunges us into the next episode.

The framing device, as best one can tell, is a single drunken conversation between Jack and his long-suffering wife, Charmian, in which he regales her with the details of his biography to date (with the intimation that the end is not far off).

He grows up on a farm, goes to sea at a young age, educates himself in a whirlwind stint of schooling, takes up writing (this aspect of things is skimmed over lightly) and falls into despair. And of course he drinks, drinks and drinks some more.

Larsen's chamber score glitters and dances like the shards of a broken whiskey bottle, and Littell's text sashays wittily from scene to scene. Saturday's performance, presented by the Sonoma City Opera and Sonoma State's Green Music Festival, was delivered with impressive dexterity under the guidance of music director Mary Chun and stage director Joseph Graves.

But for all the skill and meticulous attention to detail on display, "Every Man Jack" isn't very illuminating, and it certainly isn't much fun. The vividness with which the piece conjures up the experience of two hours in the presence of a rambling, incoherent tosspot is precisely what makes it hard to take a lot of pleasure from it.

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Even as incarnated by the fantastically charismatic American baritone Rod Gilfry, the Jack London we meet here is someone many of us would make tracks to avoid having to spend too much time with. Sure, he's a literary souse in the well-oiled tradition of [Edgar Allan Poe](#) and [Charles Bukowski](#), but that doesn't make him good company (and two intermission-less hours of free-form phantasmagoria is a strain on even the most indulgent audience).

What lingers most crisply in the imagination is the effect of the brisk individual set pieces - a patter song on the iconic text "I'll have a beer," or a nightmare memory of vaudeville burlesque, or the seductive keening of the sea as Jack hears the first strains of the siren song that will ultimately tempt him to suicide.

Gilfry lent every bit of gusto and charm to the title role, conveying Jack's torment in musical terms as well as doing a dapper bit as John Barleycorn, the always complaisant embodiment of the bottle. He was ably matched by mezzo-soprano [Jennifer Lane](#), whose performance as Charmian combined voluptuousness, vulnerability and rage in a potent blend.

No less striking were the four supporting singers, sopranos Susan Narucki and [Ilana Davidson](#), and tenors John Duykers and [Brad Bradshaw](#), who all sang with terrific poise and clarity while changing characters with chameleonic swiftness. In the pit, the members of Earplay provided eloquent and precise instrumental playing.

In the end, though, what's missing from "Every Man Jack" is London's prose -- the only thing that makes us care about him in the first place. The opera concludes with a few desultory spoken excerpts from his most famous works and some "call of the wild" lupine howls, but they aren't enough to clear one's head from the preceding binge.

Every Man Jack: Opera. 7:30 p.m. Wednesday, 8 p.m. Saturday and 3 p.m. Sunday. Evert B. Person Theatre, [Sonoma State University](#), Rohnert Park. Tickets: \$34-\$68. Call (877) 778-3378 or go to [www.sonomacityopera.org](#).

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