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Home / Z-Space 2019 Review: Howards End, America



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Allen Shearer & Claudia Stevens Provocative Work Gets A Engaging Production

By [Lois Silverstein](#) 1 month ago 0 Comments



Elegant, thoughtful, persuasive – that is “Howards End, America,” Allen Shearer and Claudia Stevens’ new chamber opera, which just premiered in San Francisco’s Z space.

Adapted from E.M.Forster’s outstanding novel, “Howards End,” set in 1910 Edwardian England, Shearer and Stevens turned fiction into music and lyrics set in 1950s America, a time of fierce race relations, class distinctions and challenging personal human relationships. EarPlay provided the core players and invited guests to create an excellent musical crossover. The audience stayed completely involved.

Unpacking the Narrative

Shearer and Stevens followed Forster’s narrative with meticulous attention. Novelistic drive, more than dramatic, led the way, although each aspect of the story plumbed its dramatic depth. Action and character moved the whole together. What we had were richly textured characters whose personal choices mirrored the times as they led us through that era.

The meeting between Helen Schlegel, performed by soprano Sara Duchovnay, and tenor Michael Dailey, was not only a graceful and thoughtful, lyric, and comedic

“tete a tete” in that rainy street beyond Boston’s Symphony Hall, but an initiation into the “sturm und drang” of the conflictual core of the story. Umbrellas and rain drops and the bustle of post-concert-goers gave us at once a realistic picture but also a sample of the human interaction that thrust the ideas forward.

By the time tea at the Schlegels was served, we were well-enmeshed in the social-racial issue Leonard Bast brought to the table. Tension lay between the tea-cups and as the scene unfolded, it rose to the surface. There it remained for the rest of Act one; in Act two, the tension reached its apogee, Leonard by the end crawling along the ground trying to touch again the moment where his aspiration soared.

A Poet & Two Sisters

Michael Dailey looked and acted and sang aspiring poet Leonard Bast with moving clarity. His voice had just the right amount of lyric beauty for such a character; and his portrayal of physical and emotional pathos reached out beyond the humiliations he underwent. Schiller’s “Ode to Joy” from Beethoven’s 9th Symphony rather than Forster’s choice of the heroic 5th was meant to emphasize the brotherhood theme. Of course it failed to catch fire between fraternity jock Charles Wilcox, sung by baritone Daniel Cilli, with appropriate scorn and venom. Furthermore, it was Charles Wilcox’s swing of the golf club that killed Leonard, thus exemplifying the triumph of white privilege.

Soprano Sara Duchovnay’s rich portrait of Helen Schlegel, the bohemian and mad-cap photographer, resonated throughout the opera. Dynamic and expressive, Duchovnay sang with warmth and luster, catalyzing the racial and social dilemmas with energy. As a photographer, she moved with “elan,” thus matching her vocal vibrancy; her constant snapping of people and moments hoisted us out of moments of feeling to take “a look” at what we were doing and what was happening beneath that surface. The idea was good, if occasionally disconcerting. The highs and lows of her “I-have-wrecked-things” theme didn’t feel as emotionally convincing as the story moved toward its dark conclusion, although it was effective.

Margaret Schlegel, a devilishly hard role to deliver, was sung by soprano Nikki Einfeld. Her flexibility to shift mood and matter across such a range of ideas and subjects was excellent. Petite and powerful and possessing a luxuriant high range,

she matched mood and idea with ease. Her continuing sensitivity to her sister's plight at the end continued to the conclusion. It turned out that it was Margaret, after all, redeemed them both.

The two sisters sang most in the upper registers, and in their duets, their overlapping timbres sometimes lacked enough contrast to satisfy. Subtle distinctions were there, but with more blurring than distinction. This was not so with Charles and Henry, whose vocal lines satisfied the lower reaches and emphasized the strong exercise of male privilege.

Poignant Depth

Mezzo-Soprano Erin Neff sang Ruth Wilcox with exceptional poignancy. Her generosity and open-spirited tenderness delivered a fine contrast to the Wilcox men and how their selfishness amplified her desire to leave Howards End to Margaret, someone who understood her sensibility. The garden scene became an eloquent contrast to that suffocating bias.

Jacky Bast, former Jazz singer, was sung and performed with distinction by Candace Johnson. The role itself ran at the edge of stereotype, but Johnson's clarity and expressive sound, her developed facial expression, and her flexible movement steadied her portrait. She used her seductive skills to expose the preening Henry not only as a two-timer, but someone who at the core, remained selfish and self-seeking. Longing couched in her former powerlessness suggested that "how dare you" might turn, ultimately, into actual change. Thus, she doubles Leonard's racial plight.

Henry Wilcox, amply sung by baritone Philip Skinner, relayed to the audience that he might not be in full voice, but carried the weight of industrialist arrogance even grabbing Margaret Schlegel for his own "property." It was a perfect counterpoint to the Howards End he snatched from her legacy. Thus, theft sank to deeper and deeper levels. Skinner as Wilcox conveyed his lack of problem with taking, and then taking some more. Even at the end, his Wilcox remained self-centered, failing to digest the depth and range of his cowardice and greed.

He and his son Charles played off each other with ease, one lying to protect their mutual greed and their social record. No paste-board or stock-opera characters

here. The other artists including Joy Graham-Korst, Lee Strawn and David Whatley performed with grace.

All in the Music

Conductor and music director Bay Area artist Mary Chun led the EarPlay /Real Play orchestra of thirteen instruments with ease. The range of wind and string and percussive instruments included saxophone, an instrument Shearer said was a new instrument for him to write for. They performed with precision and enthusiasm.

As one musician commented before the show, Shearer's score had everything. Sometimes it seemed like a tap-dance, counterpointing the eloquent lyrics Stevens created. Chun brought out the best of the rich textural resonance of both word and sound.

The most satisfying parts of the arias Shearer proffered seemed the downbeats of Leonard's "A Man Like Me," Helen's, "I tempted him and I killed him," and "Let's Not Care For Once." Perhaps most touching were Ruth Wilcox's garden farewell, and the contrapuntal duets of Henry and Margaret, accenting the idea of the successful counterpoint Leonard longs for but never achieves.

Overlapping Visions

The set more than complemented the interaction of dramatic tension and narrative action. Projection Designer and Videographer Jeremy Knight devised a marvelous series of both color and black and white projections and in his set box five screens brilliantly juxtaposed indoors and outdoors. These included Howards End, indoors and out, complete with tree and brick, and the abandoned house covered with sheets, the sea, downtown Boston and Beacon Hill, the Boston Common and the Swan Boats in the Boston Public Garden. These iconic sites came and went unobtrusively, amplifying more than mere atmosphere.

Again, the narrative milieu drove us scene by scene, but never were the visuals intrusive or simply decorative. They were so smoothly done that as we shifted from scene to scene, we moved as in a dance, the new space unfolding almost organi-

cally from the last. This heightened the expressive power of the scene before us. Intimate and powerful, we moved “here” and “there” with almost never a false note. Both the projections and the idea were effective, but since land and houses were the story’s heart, it distracted from it. It seemed more Virginia Woolf than E.M. Forster and as such, focused more deeply on the metaphysical implication of death and dissolution rather than the societal conflicts. Of course the result for both is destruction, but with Leonard and Helen’s child, the future was to fulfill the promise of cessation of such tension.

Philip Lowery did a masterful job with Stage Direction. “Howards End, America” glided skillfully and smoothly through its two hours and 15 minutes. The musical line and the narrative arc was seamless. The moving of stage objects was also fluid and barely noticeable until complete; sometimes performers moved them, while at other times off-stage persons took on said responsibility.

The integration of the projections with text and tone was masterful. Rarely does the degree and quality of the projections themselves so ratify their use. Further the choices of the particular subjects was more than apt. The particularity of place – garden, bedroom, streets – matched idea and text exceptionally well. The “story” of the projections coincided with the textual story as did the musical one, and with textural precision. This, coupled with the snapping of Helen Schlegel’s camera establishing another “point of view,” almost a narrator of sorts, compelled us to look at the whole “scene” and “situation” with a journalist’s observing eye.

Here was another layer of the opera’s complexity provoking more sophisticated thought and contemplation.

Marina Polakoff provided an accurate rendering of 1950’s apparel and David Roberson did a successful lighting design. Both contributed their skills to provide a pleasing and satisfying portrait.

We need more opera at this level that is provocative as well as satisfying. The time sped by overall with quickness and ease (though the final scenes might benefit from some editing). The choices to feature so many details of the story/plot line sometimes burdened the movement and became a detriment. A prose rather than a poetic mood was the choice, and as such, idea more than emotional intensity

ruled. Despite the intimacy of this chamber opera, we need more than the moral rise and fall to carry the heart.

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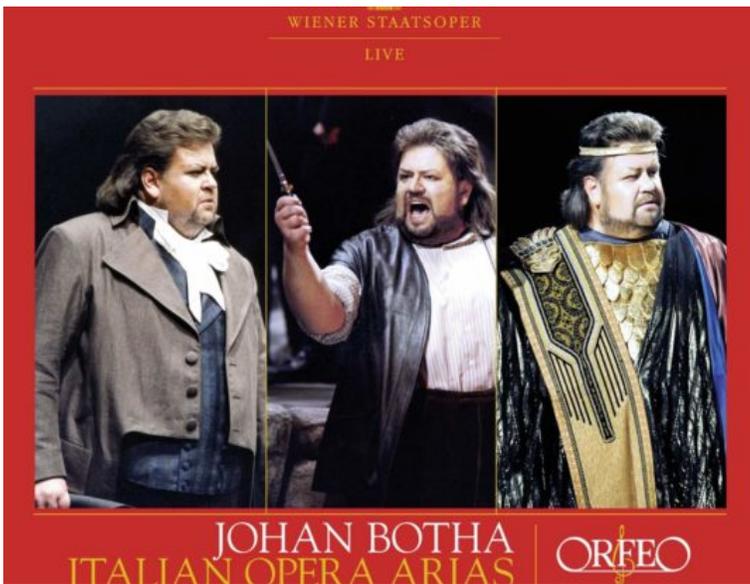
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