



Sara Duchovnay and Michael Dailey are excellent in the premiere of the chamber opera “Howards End, America.” (Courtesy Jasmine Van T)

Operatic ‘Howards End, America’ a refreshing stateside spin on classic story

JAMES AMBROFF-TAHAN / Feb. 23, 2019 12:00 a.m. / [ARTS & ENTERTAINMENT](#)

The world premiere of “Howards End, America,” by Bay Area composer Allen Shearer and his wife, librettist Claudia Stevens, would seem a tough act to follow after the Oscar-winning 1992 film and acclaimed 2017 BBC television series based on the E.M. Forster classic “Howards End.”

Yet the chamber opera is a fresh, resonant, gripping American take on the classic English novel.

The three-act opus, an Earplay/RealOpera co-production directed by Philip Lowery that debuted Friday evening in the industrial theater Z Space, is largely faithful to the

novel with two notable exceptions: it is set in 1950s Boston instead of Edwardian England, and the very poor, oft-abused Leonard and Jacky Bast are African-American instead of white — twists that add dramatic tension and provide a jarring refresher course on pre-civil rights era America.

The issue of race in America pours down upon the utilitarian set from the beginning, as Leonard Bast, radiant tenor Michael Dailey, reclaims his lost umbrella from the white, social justice-minded photographer Helen Schlegel, portrayed by the clarion-voiced soprano Sara Duchovnay.

A smitten Helen promptly invites Leonard for tea at her home, where she introduces him to her sister Margaret, the expressive soprano Nikki Einfeld.

Video projections by Jeremy Knight offer a through-the-windows evocation of the Marblehead, Mass. seacoast, the location of the mansion *Howards End* and its well-heeled residents, Ruth and Henry Wilcox and their family.

Yet the family's personal fortunes take a turn for the worse, as an ill Ruth (plush-voiced mezzo-soprano Erin Neff) plangently delivers an aria in which she recognizes her impending mortality.

Bass-baritone Philip Skinner, battling a chest cold on opening night, soldiered on admirably with stentorian power befitting his pivotal role as Henry, patriarch of the Wilcox family.

He convincingly captures the nuances of an often insensitive, yet conflicted, man. He tosses out McCarthyite insinuations against the liberal Schlegel sisters, yet marries Margaret after Ruth dies.

By contrast, Charles Wilcox, Ruth and Henry's son, is an unrepentant, ill-tempered racist; sonorous baritone Daniel Cilli smartly captures the character's frat boy nastiness (reminiscent of 21st century torch-bearing troublemakers at Charlottesville, Va.).

As Jacky, soprano Candace Johnson offers an alluringly sultry Broadway-tune-inspired declaration of her love for Leonard, and later, a similarly engaging routine as she tipsily cozies up to her former flame, an embarrassed Henry, before a party at Howards End.

A memorable scene in which Helen gives birth to Leonard's son is one of several in which the 13-member orchestra, deftly led by conductor Mary Chun, lends appropriate instrumental moods and motifs to the proceedings.

REVIEW

Howards End, America

Presented by Earplay, with RealOpera

Where: Z Space, 450 Florida St., S.F.

When: 8 p.m. Feb. 23, 2 p.m. Feb. 24

Tickets: \$30 to \$45

Contact: (415) 659 8132,

<http://www.zspace.org/howardsendamerica>