

OPERA NEWS

November 2017

The Cunning Little Vixen

NEW YORK CITY

Dell'Arte Opera Ensemble

8/21/17

DELL'ARTE OPERA ENSEMBLE presented an intriguing, well-sung production of Janacek's *The Cunning Little Vixen* as part of their UNTAMED! Opera Festival at LaMaMa (seen Aug. 21). The opera was performed in Czech and accompanied by Jonathan Dove's glittering orchestral reduction, led with grace by David Stech. Director Ashraf Sewailam mined the fable's subtext for a more overt take on its social commentary, emphasizing the domination of humans over the diverse, peacefully co-existing animal kingdom, as well as the supremacy of the male over the female in any species. The animals protested the poacher Harasta's murders by raising protest signs in multiple languages. When the Rooster arrived with his preening hens, they wore designer clothes under full-body veils and exhibited mixed feelings after the Vixen liberated them. When Harasta, in camo fatigues and toting a pistol, married the unwilling Terynka and draped her in a veil, Sewailam seemed to draw a line between American and Islamist extremists. However, his most interesting insight was more character-driven than conceptual. In one brief moment, the young Vixen (a kittenish Zoe Marie Hart) visibly softened and became attached to the Forester in a case of Stockholm Syndrome. This morphed into playful sexuality as the Vixen matured, emphasizing her character as a stand-in for a human mistress. At the same time, Sewailam accentuated the helplessness of the Forester, Parson and Schoolmaster, all lonely men who desire unpossessable females while fearing actual attainment. As the Vixen, Rachel Hall commanded the stage brilliantly with a plush, juicy soprano, fully invested physical and emotional responses, and such confidence with the language that she was able to use the words for maximum expressivity.

Although this Vixen emerged as a feminist icon, Hall didn't shy away from creating a flawed, relatable character whose pride often ran away with her. Her elitist contradictions were highlighted when she bragged to the Fox about having received "a human upbringing" and owning her own home (ignoring the fact that she badgered the Badger out of it.) Stephanie Kim Johnson's Fox was a subtler presence, all charming awkwardness, with a lithe, ardent soprano that was especially tender in her declaration of love. Hyunjoo Eom made a likeable Forester, with a smooth, firm baritone, and appealing boyishness. Jeremy Brauner proved a compelling actor and displayed a forthright, clarion tenor as the melancholy Schoolmaster, while Brian Alvarado was a vulnerable Parson, confessing his sexual misadventures with quiet self-loathing. Like all bullies, Joshua Miller's menacing Harasta was revealed as a coward, and he layered a pitiable quality over his violent bluster. The ensemble impersonated their animals with liveliness and offered a vibrant choral sound. Claire Townsend's costumes borrowed from several cultures: the Forester wore traditional Afghani garb, while the Frog sported a Central Park Conservancy T-shirt. You-Shin Chen's movable bushes and ramps allowed for multiple settings within the forest and helped communicate the passage of time. —*Joanne Sydney Lessner*