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"Telling Tales and Times"

Washington

Kennedy Center for the Performing Arts

09/10/2001 - 12, 14, 16, 20, 23*, 26, 29 September

Jacques Offenbach: *Les Contes d'Hoffmann* (*The Tales of Hoffmann*)

Denyce Graves (Muse of Poetry and Nicklausse), Kyle Ketelsen (Lindorf, Coppelius, Dr. Miracle), Vladimir Felenchak (Andres, Cochenille, Pitichinaccio, Frantz), Robert Baker (Nathanael), James Shaffran (Hermann), Julian Gavin (Hoffmann), Corey Evan Rotz (Spalanzani), Maki Mori (Olympia), Victoria Livengood (Giulietta), Joel Schmidt (Schlemil), Grant Youngblood (Dapertutto), **Luz Del Alba** Rubio (Antonia), Stefan Szkafarowsky (Crespel), Elena Manistina (Voice of Antonia's mother), Kyle Engler (Stella) Giovanni Agostinucci (Production Design) Marta Domingo (Concept and Direction) Emmanuel Villaume (Conductor) Washington Opera Chorus

The jitters. That's what we've got--the jitters. Ever since the September 11 "Attack on America," despite attempts to regain degrees of normalcy, despite attempts at laughter and silliness, despite reassurances from our President and governmental-military leaders...we've still got the jitters. It hardly matters what you're doing. Just below the surface is uneasiness about life and awareness, as our news services keep telling us, that life, as we know it will never again be the same.

This is where music should come in handy--the salve of the soul, the sounds to heal. With that encouragement and anticipation, people began to fill the Kennedy Center Opera House again for the company's current run of *Così fan Tutti* and *Tales of Hoffmann*. The season opened September 8, only three days before the terrorist attack. Since then, reports from arts groups

everywhere have told of very small houses. Arts groups inside and outside Washington have debated the appropriateness of offering entertainment, as have audiences the appropriateness of being entertained, in the midst of such turmoil and trouble.

And then there's the debate over how safe it is to venture into public places where large groups of people congregate, issues never before considerations in this country.

The concern is not without reason at the Kennedy Center, a cultural landmark building, surrounded by the landmarks that have become associated with this seat of Government. The Center sits near the Pentagon, the White House, and the Capitol. And it sits in the flight path of the Reagan National Airport. The sound of planes overhead is commonplace here, or at least it was until the airport was closed. Since then, it's been eerily quiet, or mostly so.

The recent performance of *Tales of Hoffmann* was a good example of how uncertain feelings are. On the vast veranda of the Kennedy Center, at an intermission, the sound of jets flying above caused patrons to stream into the sunlight and stare, quietly and nervously into the sky to see what was happening or about to happen. Inside the lush red Opera House, an unfortunate medical problem with a patron in an upper tier was accompanied by loud voices that competed with the sounds of the opera. For those not in the immediate vicinity, heads turned as people tried to make out through the darkness what was happening, thoughts easily and quickly slipping into current events and wonders of what horror might be about to take place. These conditions, these factors remain at the surface of emotions, and even the opera, that consummate art form of all encompassing emotions, seems not to be able to quell concern and anxiety.

It's the jitters. Plain and simple-the jitters. Perhaps that's why elements of the company's large production of "Tales" seemed not to draw this particular audience into its magic. Make no mistake about it, there were many fine things in this Martha Domingo-directed production. Many fine things.

Vocally, the cast featured some very strong performers, the most notable being the superb mezzo-**soprano** Denyse Graves in the dual roles of the Muse and Nicklausse. Graves' voice remains one of the most luxurious and desirable in the contemporary ranks. It's a voice of velvet and virtuoso qualities. She's

not only a fine singer but also a fine actress, one whose roles come alive in respects not often met by other accomplished singers. She was vivid and convincing in her dual roles and held the audience in her hands.

Soprano Maki Mori, an incredible petite-framed find as Olympia, also made quite a vocal splash. Her pitch-perfect virtuoso skills made Olympia's arias sparkle. Added to the vocal delights was her very capable portrayal of mechanical doll movements that much more to savor.

Mezzo **soprano** Victoria Livengood, as Giulietta, was appropriately seductive and on the sensual side. And, she sang with confidence and power that easily found her capable of balancing her sound with that of the orchestra. And, Uruguayan **soprano** **Luz Del Alba** Rubio, as Antonia, displayed a sweet sound and nice, sensitive portrayal.

Bass-baritone Kyle Ketelsen, as Lindorf, Coppelius, and Dr. Miracle, provided a perfect combination of singing and acting skills. His voice is deep and resonant and his laugh, as Miracle, defined evil. In fact, his Miracle was riveting, Ketelsen's every movement seemingly perfectly timed to the music. As Miracle picked up a violin toward the close of Act III, and proceeded to play with devilish fervor, Ketelsen's fake fingering was even coordinated with the running violin passages coming from the pit, adding flair and realism to the moment. And, when he ended by smashing the violin into pieces, it simply capped off the impression. In the way of dastardly and evil, Grant Youngblood finely filled the role of Dappertutto.

Australian tenor Julian Gavin, alas, was not a total Hoffmann. Most certainly his upper register is solid and intact and his ability to sustain those high notes enviable. He displayed no problem with the sustained stratosphere, easily rising above the robust orchestral sound and impressing with his ability to project. In the mid to lower ranges, though, things were not as warm and appealing. The tone took on a flat-feeling quality. His physical and energetic characterization and the frequent opportunities to sing in the stratosphere, however, made his overall Hoffmann one of pleasing proportions.

This production was a co-production endeavor with the Kirov Opera/Mariinsky Theater (St. Petersburg, Russia) and the Los Angeles

Opera. The sets were functional and bulky, and, for the most part, were thematic and appropriate, the only exception being the Venetian set and costumes, which took on a gaudy look.

The large chorus delivered another solidly sung performance. Musically, the orchestra responded obediently to Emmanuel Villaume's baton. Rather uncharacteristically, there were a few noticeable moments of passing raggedness. But considering all things surrounding the events of this "Tales of Hoffmann" and the tales of the cities, the production was a class act and an appreciated attempt to provide solace from the outside world, if only for a few hours.

John C. Shulson