



Rushdie's 'Haroun' makes a delicious opera

By FREDERICK M. WINSHIP | Nov. 12, 2004 at 11:44 PM

NEW YORK, Nov. 12 (UPI) -- "Haroun and the Sea of Stories," an opera by Charles Wuorinen based on Salman Rushdie's allegorical children's novel, is one of the New York City Opera's most endearing new productions and a perfect introduction to opera for young people.

Children are rarely seen at the opera in New York, but the audiences for "Haroun" have brought out more family groups with youngsters than usual. The work is a fairy tale full of fantasy and memorable characters, both human and animal, and is designed to entertain the child in us no matter how old we are.

British poet James Fenton has adapted the whimsical novel into a witty libretto full of rhyming clichés in the English vernacular that sound surprisingly fresh and amusing in the context of opera. City Opera's surtitles above the stage proscenium make it easy for readers of any age to follow the preposterous plot.

Haroun is the son of Rashid, a story-teller by trade who has lost his wife to another man and lost his gift for fishing tall tales from the Sea of Stories, his source of narrative inspiration. The boy sets out to reunite his parents and restore his father's Gift of Gab by entering a magical world where he must confront and defy Khattam-Shud, the villainous Prince of Silence and Foe of Speech.

Wuorinen, an American modernist, has contributed a brilliant, intricately instrumentalized score that demands much more of the cast than the melodious singing of conventional romantic operas. He has written only one other opera before, and "Haroun" represents something of a departure for him as a composer.

The music, ably conducted by George Manahan, reflects speech patterns, their crispness and punch, by means of 12-tone counterpoint that is marked by unusual intensity, innovative chromatism, and

rhythmic restlessness. It is at all times a delight to the ear, despite its complexity and occasional tendency to overwhelm the simple dramatic text.

The most demanding bursts of song and sustained arias full of pitch-challenging vocal leaps are given the California-born soprano Heather Buck, in the pants role of Haroun. She performs with assurance and remarkable strength throughout 2 1/2 grueling hours of performance, and her characterization of a young boy is believable and winning without being cute.

When Haroun loses his mother because of her disenchantment with her husband's life in the world of make believe, he too questions the value of stories that are not true in a world that is all too real. But in the course of precipitating a war between the creatures known as the Chupwalas and Guppees and rescuing a kidnapped princess from the clutches of Khattam-Shud, he comes to realize the worth of fantasy.

"Haroun" was written in 1990, two years after a fatwa was pronounced on Rushdie, a Muslim, calling for his assassination on the grounds of writing a sacrilegious novel, "The Satanic Verses." The author had to go underground in England and had serious concerns that his own story-telling powers were being stifled by religious fundamentalism.

These concerns are implicit in the opera when Khattam-Shud, played with melodramatic flourishes by tenor James Schaffner, explains that he is the enemy of stories because they contain worlds he cannot control.

Some other members of the large cast notable for their performances are bass-baritone Peter Strummer as Rashid and mezzo-soprano Heather Johnson as his wife, Soraya, bass Ethan Herschenfeld as a mechanical bird called the Hoopoe, tenor Joel Sorenson in the comic role of a politician named Snooty Buttoo, and baritone Michael Zegarski as a preening general.

Also Wilbur Pauley as a green-garbed gardener tottering about on platform shoes, tenor Christopher Jackson as the silly Prince Bolo, and soprano Kathryn Friest as Bolo's shrill-voice fiancée, Princess Batcheat. Three of the most gorgeously costumed singers are tenors Andrew Drost and Robert Mack in the roles of red paradise fish, Bagha and Goopy, and Ryan McPherson as a water genie.

Mark Lamos has directed the opera with imaginative flair matched by Riccardo Hernandez's simple but colorful flat sets and video screens, on which projections of the sea and tropical locales are displayed, and Candice Donnelly's lovely costumes reflecting Rushdie's roots in the Indian subcontinent. Sean Curran's choreography is charming, especially the stylized movement devised for the battle scenes.

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