

## OPERA NEWS

IN REVIEW

NEW YORK CITY – *Haroun and the Sea of Stories*, New York City Opera, 10/31/04

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Story theater: the crowd goes wild in NYCO's *Haroun* premiere

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Charles Wuorinen's *Haroun and the Sea of Stories*, which had its world premiere at New York City Opera's October 31 matinée, is an overflowing feast of witty, inventive music-theater, and the audience at Lincoln Center's State Theater gave it a triumphant welcome.

It's true that recent history helped pave the way for that triumph. Bombay-born Salman Rushdie completed his first children's novel, *Haroun and the Sea of Stories*, in 1990, while in hiding in England under an international assassination-sentence by Iran's Ayatollah Khomeini for blasphemy to Islam in the author's previous book, *The Satanic Verses*. The new novel's abundantly delightful adventure saga clothed a moral defending free speech against repression and was dedicated to the writer's first son, Zafar Haroun Rushdie, then eleven years old, the same age as Haroun in the book. The dedication is a five-line acrostic poem on the name Zafar, the last line saying, "Read, and bring me home to you." (After Khomeini's death the assassination-fatwa was lifted, yet security at the State Theater premiere was very tight, because Rushdie, who now lives in New York, was in the audience.)

History served as prelude to what Wuorinen, librettist James Fenton, the production team headed by director Mark Lamos, and all of City Opera's forces achieved. Wuorinen, an often honored twelve-tone master, here dressed up his serial apparatus with layers of colorful, bouncy, sometimes Oriental, always "singable" phrases and motives that glided or exploded in many directions. Never for one moment relaxing his contempt for "populist" neo-Romanticism or, God forbid, crossing over, he made his score move listeners with homespun sentiment (not sentimentality), tickle them with thematic jokes (such as a Valkyrie-ride quotation), charm them with an ethereal birds' chorus of six women's voices (nearly tonal in a chirping atonal context) and chill them with icy blasts of war-music.

Fenton — English poet, journalist, and longtime friend of Rushdie — retooled the novel with the plot and character omissions necessary for musicalizing such an incident-crammed story. The librettist wrote lyrics for new songs and fresh monologues for Haroun and his father, Rashid, and he used portions of the acrostic dedication to be sung by Haroun's mother at the beginning and by both parents at the lovely, five-handkerchief ending.

The story's core concerns Rashid, a famous storyteller, losing his "gift of the gab" when his wife, Saroya, deserts him. Haroun, feeling partly to blame for his father's grief, travels with him and is swept into a great adventure to save Rashid's source of inspiration, the Sea of Stories, from pollution by the Forces of Darkness and Silence (read Khomeini) and thus restore Rashid's talent. Father and son then go home, where they find Saroya.

The long, arduous but emotionally generous title-role should be a career-breakthrough for soprano Heather Buck. Diminutive but friskily all over the stage, she inhabited and enlivened her character and the story, and the music's high flights fazed her not. Peter Strummer, the veteran bass-baritone comedian, brought vocal strength and much character-nuance to Rashid. Heather Johnson was a gently lyrical mezzo as Saroya, and another mezzo, Kathryn Friest, was hilarious as Princess Batcheat, who is supposed to curdle all ears with an unbuckled belt straight from the intestines when she lights a mock-torch song. Friest's briefer role of another tower-imprisoned princess proved she could sing correctly. Lively acting and singing were also provided by James Schaffner, Joel Sorensen, Javier Abreu and Lawrence Long, as various villains, and Ethan Herschenfeld, Ryan McPherson, Wilbur Pauley and others, as nicer humans, birds, fish and animated objects.

Conductor George Manahan controlled and balanced the solo and ensemble singing in all the lyrical, peppery and scary pages and kept the orchestra in tip-top shape. The sixteen-voice chorus stayed in the pit, leaving plenty of stage-space for Mark Lamos's zesty actions for the solo singers, who never collided with Seán Curran's powerfully choreographed dancers. Riccardo Hernandez's sets were sensibly spare panels, all the better to accommodate Peter Nigrini's many film projections of mountains, moons and oceans. Candice Donnelly's costumes included spectacular fantasies of flora, fauna and other very human nonhumans. One complaint: the crucial sunburst that defeats the dark forces needed much more wattage to really flood the stage.

But technical flaws or no, when (never mind if) *Haroun* arrives in your part of the planet, listen and bring it home with you.

-LEIGHTON KERNER