

Long Journeys to Happy Endings

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Last weekend, just over a decade after its premiere at the Lyric Opera of Chicago, Anthony Davis's "Amistad" was produced in a revised version at the Spoleto Festival USA. Now shorter and leaner, with a smaller orchestra and cast, the two-hour opera makes its musical points more clearly than it did in 1997, and the taut production, staged in the round by Sam Helfrich in the newly renovated Memminger Auditorium, has a compelling immediacy for the 640 audience members. Yet the opera remains a story told rather than enacted, and listeners need to stay glued to the supertitles for Thulani Davis's libretto in order to get the point.

"Amistad" is based on a true story: In 1839, the African captives on a Spanish slave ship mutinied off Cuba and tried to force the remaining crew to sail them back to Africa. When the ship ran aground off Long Island, the Africans became the center of a court case in which abolitionists argued for their freedom (importing slaves into Cuba and the U.S. was illegal) and won.

The constantly changing, irregular rhythms of Mr. Davis's intricate score, which is flavored with solo percussion and is only sporadically melodic, create an environment of unease and dislocation. This is most effective in Act I, as the Africans suffer the uncertainty of their voyage and their frightening encounter with the Americans. Some arias -- such as the wrenching account by Magru (Janinah Burnett) of the baby she left behind -- are powerful, as are the choruses. But the courtroom-based Act II sags as the mutiny is replayed several times, the legal arguments of the case are outlined, and the music begins to sound repetitive. The magical dimension provided by two African gods -- the Trickster (Michael Forest), who has lots of high notes and sings scat, and the Goddess of the Waters (Mary Elizabeth Williams), whose text-driven aria about the Atlantic crossing is too long -- is confusing rather than illuminating.

The orchestra, conducted by Emmanuel Villaume and featuring jazz sax and other woodwind solo playing by J.D. Parran, dealt valiantly with the challenging, acerbic music. The impressive cast of singers also included Gregg Baker, imposing as Cinque, the leader of the Africans, and the lush-voiced mezzo Kendall Gladen as the captive Bahia. Memminger is an open space with moveable seating, and Caleb Hale Wertenbaker created the simple but effective set: a raised oval platform with the audience on its two long sides. Peter West's lighting defined its spaces, and Kaye Voyce's costumes dramatically separated the Africans in their colorful garb from the buttoned-up New Englanders. Mr. Helfrich's ingeniously flowing direction kept the cast in motion so that it was possible to hear even when the singers faced away -- quite a feat given the acoustical challenges of performing unamplified in such a nontraditional space.

Spoletto billed "Monkey: Journey to the West" as music theater, but one could also call it a Chinese circus accompanied by a pop score combining traditional Chinese instruments, a modern Western orchestra, and contemporary rock. The elements fit together remarkably well. The work of director Chen Shi-Zheng, best known for his "Peony Pavilion," and the team of composer Damon Albarn (lead singer of Blur) and video artist Jamie Hewlett, the creators of the top-selling virtual cartoon band Gorillaz, "Monkey" is based on a beloved 16th-century Chinese novel, the tale of a mischievous monkey who accompanies a monk on a quest to India to bring back the Buddhist scriptures.

Monkey's journey unfolds in several dimensions. Scenes begin with funny projected video animations that are then brought to life by singers (who are often flying through the air) and a breathtakingly athletic team of acrobats and martial artists. There's a scene under the sea, a heavenly banquet that features a rubber-limbed (and rather stomach-turning) contortionist, a seduction (by the Spiderwoman) performed by an aerialist suspended from silk ribbons, a long battle for the possession of an iron fan, and finally the arrival in Paradise. This features not only an image of Buddha that rises the entire height of the stage but a posse of girls, dressed in electric green and pink, who twirl multiple flowers on the ends of sticks.

It is a visual feast, heightened by Mr. Hewlett's elaborate costumes; the masks, prosthetics, wigs and makeup by Bertrand Doucet; and Nick Richings's lighting. Music plays a supporting role. The vocal parts, performed in Chinese, have a pop-style timbre, rather than the high-pitched, swooping cadences of traditional Chinese opera.

When the focus moves away from Monkey, played with naughty but determined aplomb by Li Bo, one isn't always entirely sure what is going on, but there is always something -- sometimes too much -- to watch. Several of the scenes needed editing, and the two-hour running time could have used an intermission, the better, perhaps, for the audience to contemplate how much the insurance must have cost.

Video turned out to be the most interesting aspect of Spoleto's traditional opera presentation, Rossini's "La Cenerentola" at the barn-like Galliard Auditorium. Emmanuel Favre's set design featured an enormous picture frame that would occasionally come alive with the animations of video designer Gilles Papain: Fountains played; a coach in silhouette galloped down the road; the image of one of the characters, much magnified, lifted a curtain to peer into the room. It was very clever and attuned to the breeziness of the opera, a version of the Cinderella story in which the prince and his valet exchange roles to figure out which lady should be the queen.

However, conductor Matteo Beltrami's lackluster tempi and Charles Roubaud's pedestrian direction stifled the wit and vitality of the piece. The most stylish singers were Bruno Taddia as Dandini, the prince's valet, who appeared to be channeling Danny Kaye, and Timothy Nolen as the heroine Angelina's pompous stepfather, Don Magnifico. As Angelina, Sandra Picques Eddy displayed a handsomely burnished mezzo but missed the sparkle required to pull off bravura vocal moments. Victor Ryan Robertson's bright tenor sounded mechanical in the Prince's high, fast-moving coloratura. Paolo Pecchioli oversang as Alidoro, the Prince's tutor and enabler of the love story, while the stepsisters, Jennifer Check and Laura Vlasak Nolen, were the victims of some goofy directing. They should have invited the Monkey to shake things up.