

Il trovatore in Orange

August 2007

Orange's magnificent Théâtre Antique was packed to the gills. France's glamour tenor Roberto Alagna was le trouvère, reputedly one of his best roles. And Les Chorégies d'Orange had well met the challenge of assembling a supporting cast for this dashing, now forty-four year-old tenorissimo with the Leonora of American soprano Susan Neves, the Azucena of Russian mezzo Larrissa Diadkova, and the Conte di Luna of South Korean baritone Seng-Hyoun Ko.

Make no mistake, Il trovatore is not about infanticide and bloody revenge. It is about singing. Nonetheless a case can be made for casting a handsome trouvère, and in Orange his gypsy mother exuded an elegance of bearing that could even have engendered such tenorial flash, though of course she is not really his mother and really is a hag. Verisimilitude was completely lost with the pairing of this trouvère's cocky Sicilian swagger with the ballsy swagger of his somewhat shorter Korean brother. It was international opera at its best, meaning that the casting ultimately did make dramatic sense where it matters most for Il Trovatore -- in the voices.

The venue is huge, dominated by a massive back wall with some small architectural detail remaining. Because the stage may be as much as 60 meters wide it reads as a massive horizontal space, clearly impossible to transform scenically. Thus the Orange Roman theater gave definition to minimalist staging long before this late twentieth century style became accepted by opera audiences elsewhere.

So it was staging as usual, this time by Charles Roubaud who has proven himself a fine minimalist in many productions hereabouts, most recently Die Walküre in Marseille. As usual massive armies poured in from the huge side openings, clashed as necessary in the middle and flowed out the other side, here the Aragon soldiers and their officers in tailored pale blue gray uniforms, the Biscay rebels without uniform, mostly in black. By contrast nuns flowed in, circled and flowed out of a hidden upstage opening, white habits billowing. Costumes are everything at Orange. Costumer Katia Dufлот rose to the occasion providing something akin to operatic haute couture, never allowing a level of elegance to falter even when clothing Verdi's gypsy hag.

The principal singers were kept right where they belonged -- downstage center, le trouvère and his elegant gypsy stepmother in chic, close fitting Spanish black. Leonora on the other hand was covered in yards of a gray-blue gossamer fabric able to be caught by the slightest of breezes, creating an impressively dynamic presence. Mme. Neves remained immobile for her fourth act arias, allowing the movements of her costume to amplify her pianissimos and to brighten the fires of these showpieces. Nine thousand people, maybe ten, roared their appreciation.

Downstage center to be sure, and in obvious rapport with conductor Gianandrea Nosedà, this fine cast delivered great arias and ensembles of Verdi's most melodious opera on the level of what seemed near perfection. Though when not communing with his divas and divos this conducting star indulged in lugubrious, self-important tempos, sometimes losing the scores of chorus voices (unlikely as it may seem, tight ensemble has been the rule rather than the exception at Orange over the years).

A stepped structure upstage center gave access the large door centered in the back wall, a point of dramatic entrance and exit. It was here that director Roubaud positioned Alagna, his sword thrust high, to deliver the critically incorrect high "c" of di quella pira. Even though the duration of this high note was kept tastefully brief it evoked a huge ovation, the long duration of which Alagna held this hyper dramatic pose.

The most striking visual element of this Orange production was its use of projection and video, the work of one Gilles Papain. For once the cheap effect stigma of such tricks was overcome, perhaps because projecting video images of such magnitude (an estimated 40 by 60 meters) could hardly be cheap, and images of such size can only be imposing. Inspired by the breezes and sometimes the winds that play around the uncovered theater, these huge, artful video images, always in black and white, created a visual energy in this massive space that complimented its high musical energy.

The shadow of the single branch that made Leonora's garden seemed to move with the gentle breezes that stirred the evening air, battle scene flags beat urgently to the hints of a mistral wind, the huge raft of votive candles flickered dimly in the monastery. Finally a pyre ignited; at first a red slash appeared across the width of the stage, then a huge, intense, red flame burst onto the wall into which Azucena shouted her revenge.

This final image, playing beyond the words but certainly within the intention of Verdi's libretto, was driven with inspired musical brilliance by conductor Nosedà, creating the kind of spine tingling finale that occurs every so often in Orange, and keeps us going back for more.