

Tristan & Isolde: Dallas does Grand Opera

Written by BY TERRY MATHEWS, News-Telegram Arts Editor
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The Dallas Opera has moved into the stratosphere with its current production of Richard Wagner's "Tristan & Isolde." For those who love grand opera, it just doesn't get any better.

The grand opera experience is not for everyone. Wagner's 1856 masterpiece runs four-and-a-half hours, with two intermissions. The story of Wagner's star-crossed lovers is no retelling of Romeo and Juliet. There is no comic relief, no jester to lighten things up a bit. The characters are layered and complex and the music is big, bold and in your face. But, if big, bold and in your face is your thing, this performance will take your breath away.

Christopher Anderson, who provided the entertaining and informational pre-opera lecture, summed up the effect Wagner's music has on us with a quote by Gottfried Leibniz: *Music is the pleasure the human mind experiences from counting without being aware that it is counting.*

Not only is the music in this production big, bold and pleasurable, the Dallas Opera's stage design is otherworldly – in a good way.

Projection director Elaine J. McCarthy has taken the Winspear's huge bare stage and transformed it into a ship, a castle and the hero's death bed. And she sets the scene with surreal images projected onto moving scrims, a backdrop and the stage floor. McCarthy's ability to blend new world technology with an old world art form should be adopted by every performance art company on the planet.

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McCarthy's vision is especially effective during the second act, when the heroic soldier Tristan and his Irish princess, Isolde, spend a rapturous night alone in her room. Although pledged to marry Tristan's mentor, King Marke, Isolde falls under a magic love potion and declares her undying loyalty to Tristan. The lighting works to enhance the lovers' passion and desire, even though the stage contains nothing but a square bed.

Tenor Clifton Forbis and soprano Jeanne-Michèle Charbonnet must possess the endurance of iron man athletes.

Not only do they carry the opera with their magnificent voices, they do it while in full costume, wigs and make-up, while moving around on a raked (angled away from the audience) stage, which has to present its own set of issues when actions calls for characters to lie on the floor or share an embrace on the bed.

Forbis, who hails from Tennessee but currently serves as the chair of the voice department at Southern Methodist University, is a formidable Wagnerian star and a TDO veteran, having starred in the opera's inaugural performance of "Othello." His understanding of the music and his character echoed through the hall from beginning to end.



As the doomed hero Tristan, Forbis was completely believable. Not once did he falter, even during his protracted death scene at the end of Act III when he must have been exhausted. Bravo!

Miss Charbonnet soared as the fiery Isolde. Her voice should be declared a national treasure. Singing with that much passion for over four hours should have left her exhausted, yet at the end of Act III, energy literally sparked from her fingertips, jumping over the footlights and into

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the hearts of her approving audience. Brava!

Bass Kristinn Sigmundsson, a native of Iceland, brought a looming presence to the role of King Marke. His steel-reinforced vocals, coupled with a powerful physicality, made for a remarkable Dallas Opera debut. I hope to hear more from him in future productions.

“Tristan and Isolde” runs Wednesday, Feb. 22, and Saturday, Feb. 25. Flex subscriptions are still available, beginning at just \$75, and single tickets start at \$25.

Contact the Dallas Opera Box Office at 214-443-1000 or purchase online at dallasopera.org.