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A Blizzard on Marblehead Neck (review)

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A BLIZZARD ON

MARBLEHEAD NECK

ONE-ACT OPERA, MUSIC

BY JEANINE TESORI,

LIBRETTO BY TONY

KUSHNER, DIRECTED BY

FRANCESCA ZAMBELLO,

GLIMMERGLASS OPERA

THEATRE, PURCHASE,

NEW YORK, JULY

21-AUGUST 22, 2011

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A Blizzard on Marblehead Neck, a new one-act opera by Jeanine Tesori with a libretto by Tony Kushner, received an enthusiastic reception by a packed house at the Glimmerglass Opera Theatre near Cooperstown, New York, on July 21, 2011. On a sweltering day when the heat index reached 110 degrees, the hardy opera enthusiasts filled the seats of the large Opera Theatre for this much-anticipated premiere.

An admirer of the work of Eugene O'Neill, Kushner based his libretto on an incident that happened to O'Neill and his wife Carlotta in the winter of 1951 at their home in Marblehead Neck, Massachusetts, during a blizzard. This incident serves as a window on the marriage and emotional state of the O'Neills, who had been ravaged by illness and pain. According to Arthur and Barbara Gelb, O'Neill was thought to be suffering from a type of Parkinson's disease (actually it turned out to be a different nervous condition), which deprived him of his capacity to write, virtually ending his career at the peak of his power, and Carlotta, in turn, suffered from "severe nervous tension and depression." The Gelbs also report in the program notes that both O'Neills were taking "strong medications containing bromide that had hallucinatory side effects of which they were unaware." In a chance meeting in Boston, this reviewer met Dr. David Federman, professor of medicine at Harvard

University, who knew the drug and illness the O'Neills succumbed to. The illness was called "bromism," which caused mental difficulties, a rash, and drowsiness. He explained that the drug was given as a sleeping potion. The Marblehead incident is no doubt authentic, since medical and police records support the account. Moreover, the Gelbs explain that "a few years after O'Neill's death in 1953, [Carlotta] sardonically depicted to us the climactic (and decidedly operatic) conflict in Marblehead as 'A little drama in the home.'"



FIG. 1

(Left to right) Patricia Schuman as Carlotta Monterey, Stephanie Foley Davis as Mary McCarthy, Aleksey Bogdanov as Bernard DeVoto and Carin Gilfry as Louis Kronenberger in the Glimmerglass Festival's world-premiere production of *A Blizzard on Marblehead Neck*. (Photo by William Brown.)

All of these facts are important in understanding the nature and structure of the plot and narrative of the opera, as well as the horrendous quarrel over regulating the thermostat as the frustrated O'Neills verbally trash each other's character and career and hurl epithets in each other's faces. In this torrent of abuse Kushner vividly shows the anger, frustration, and unrestrained language of these two tormented and drugged victims. Carlotta to Eugene: "you cheap mean blackhearted thickheaded mick!" And Eugene to Carlotta: "Lottie, you're boring me. / Heat-greedy harpy, / it's life here with you, dear, / you're murdering me." Accompanying this vigorous dialogue is the expressive and soaring music of Jeanine Tesori, who successfully worked previously

with Kushner on the musical *Caroline, or Change*. The piercing arias that she wrote to portray Carlotta's misery approach grand tragic dimensions of suffering and grief. Tesori conducted the orchestra for the Glimmerglass production. The role of Carlotta was well sung by Patricia Schuman, soprano. David Pittsinger, bass-baritone, sensitively played O'Neill, stoically walking out into the blizzard to end his unhappy life despite Carlotta's appeals to come back.



FIG. 2

David Pittsinger as Eugene O'Neill and Patricia Schuman as Carlotta Monterey in the Glimmerglass Festival's production of *A Blizzard on Marblehead Neck*. (Photo by Julieta Cervantes.)

Kushner's awareness that the O'Neills experienced medication-induced hallucinations becomes a successful creative device to dramatize their grievous mental state and pain. Consequently, he presents five "hallucinatory" episodes, the first experienced by both Carlotta and Gene, and the remainder entirely by O'Neill. These five episodes were highly effective as drama, giving the audience a deeper perception of the characters. In the first episode Carlotta and Gene are confronted by three drama critics who panned the 1946 production of *The Iceman Cometh*. Their negative reviews helped close the play, denying the O'Neills the royalties they had need of. The three critics are Mary McCarthy, writer for *The Nation*, sung by Stephanie Poley Davis, mezzo-soprano; Louis Kronenberg, writer for *Time* magazine, sung by Carin Giltry, mezzo-soprano; and Bernard DeVoto, writer for the

Saturday Review of Literature, sung by Aleksey Bogdanov, baritone. One after another, the three critics make disparaging remarks about O'Neill's plays. Kronenberger dismisses O'Neill as a "clever contriver of moods / Who suffers and never thinks." Although O'Neill says nothing to the critics, Carlotta lashes out with her sharp tongue: "You impotent faggot!" DeVoto also diminishes O'Neill's reputation: "From time to time he supplies / Drama of some minor merit, but / Not worth the Nobel Prize." Last, McCarthy asserts that O'Neill is a "playwright who, frankly, can't write!" The trio also take revenge on Carlotta, singing in unison: "She is a bag and a nag."

Although Carlotta talks back to the critics, O'Neill seems to place himself above them by ignoring them. He says goodbye to Carlotta and then goes outside in his bathrobe, not heeding Carlotta's pleas to remain inside. Before she goes out in her robe to find her husband, Carlotta speaks one last rebuttal to McCarthy, who wants to read the unpublished manuscript of what turned out to be his masterpiece, *Long Day's Journey Into Night*. Carlotta's answer is, understandably, "No." Moreover, she makes a prophetic judgment to McCarthy: "Some day you'll read it, and regret / the things you wrote. Or maybe you won't / I don't care."

O'Neill's "hallucinations," as imagined by Kushner in scene 2, are the richest in detail and allusion, the most varied and entertaining, and in some parts the most mysterious. Moreover, Tesori's accompanying score for these scenes was perhaps the most beautiful in the opera. The first "hallucination" shows O'Neill in the role of King Lear in Shakespeare's storm scene when he is lost and abandoned on the wild heath. The parallel is perfect, since both O'Neill and Lear play the role of defiant outcasts, howling at night in a dangerous storm. Kushner's stage directions suggest that O'Neill should intone "like a plummy 19th Century actor," suggesting, perhaps, that O'Neill, in hurling defiance at the storm, is recalling the stylized manner of his father's stage.

The next "hallucination" that O'Neill experiences is the sound of a young woman singing on one of his favorite phonograph records, "The Missing Song," a song describing a life full of frustration and lost opportunities, a theme that O'Neill could sympathize with. After this song is finished, another short and comical "hallucination" appears when O'Neill suddenly thinks he is an Irish dirt-farmer with a "thick stage-Irish peasant accent" who is hauled up before a magistrate on an undisclosed charge. He claims not to be a wife-beater, "for all that I was often and sorely tempted." The comic mood of the scene changes, however, when the Irishman mentions his children, whom he calls the "Fruit of the poison tree." This phrase seems to allude to the Garden of Eden's forbidden fruit from the tree of the knowledge of

good and evil, a dire phrase suggesting fatalistic dimensions to his children's calamitous lives. The deep mood of sorrow shown by O'Neill when children are mentioned foreshadows the last "hallucination," when O'Neill meets the most mysterious character in all of the episodes, the unknown figure in white who, Kushner says in the libretto notes, resembles Oona O'Neill Chaplin. The appearance of the Oona character is unusual since O'Neill disowned his daughter in 1943, after she married Charlie Chaplin against his wishes.



FIG. 3

David Pittsinger as Eugene O'Neill in the Glimmerglass Festival's world-premiere production of *A Blizzard on Marblehead Neck* (Photo by Julieta Cervantes.)

This last "hallucination" begins when the young woman in white walks up to O'Neill in the snow, smiling and ingratiating. O'Neill immediately recognizes that she looks like Oona and accepts her help in walking as she holds his hand and leads him into deeper snow. Her help makes O'Neill imagine that he is blind Oedipus being led by faithful Antigone. The role of the young woman was sung beautifully by Lindsay Russell, soprano. The duet they sang had the sweetness of a great love song. But the reality is that she is an Angel of Death since she soothingly encourages O'Neill to "rest your / Aching bones, your weary soul, your heart, / your stone-cold burning, broken heart / Sleep here Edmund, sleep Eugene, / sleep without waking / sleep without waking." Evidently, this is what O'Neill wanted to hear, since he ends the scene with a prayer, saying he writes "Really only for God," and then lies down in the

snow to die, saying, “Goodbye old moon, / Drop into the sea / I don’t need you anymore.”

Who, then, is the young lady who looks like Oona O’Neill? Is she a manifestation of O’Neill’s unconscious attempt to see and communicate with his estranged daughter, or is she a projection of what O’Neill thinks is the underlying hostile motive of his daughter? Perhaps O’Neill’s comment about Oona in scene 1 may help explain his vision of Oona: “She means to kill me: / Avenging her mommy / whom daddy abandoned / She takes up with Chaplin/ murdering me! / Oona, my daughter. / Dead to me.” The scene ends when the girl walks off the stage, leaving O’Neill in the deep snow.

All the dark clouds of suffering and gloom are dispelled in the epilogue when Marblehead Police Officer Andrew Snow, sung by Jeffrey Gwaitney, tenor, rescues the half-frozen O’Neill and whisks him off to Massachusetts General Hospital where his life is saved. Officer Snow was called to rescue Carlotta, but found O’Neill instead. Happily, Carlotta was also found, and the couple was admitted to a hospital stay, O’Neill for a broken leg and Carlotta for a drug-induced psychosis.

The well-staged scene when Officer Snow discovers O’Neill in the snow dissolves into another scene in which O’Neill lies in a hospital bed attended by a nurse. This final scene is dominated by the good-natured Officer Snow. Giving Officer Snow the opera’s final lines was a clever stroke by Kushner, since he is a normal happy man doing his job as a policeman, showing sympathy and compassion for the O’Neills. In this way Snow gives closure and peace to the painful story. He even gives credit to Carlotta for the rescue of O’Neill: “So, she did it, sorta saved him. She saved him.” When he mentions that people say Carlotta is “a terrible scold” and “locked O’Neill out in the cold,” he is forgiving of human shortcomings: “So they fight like the dickens. / That’s what people are saying. Who cares?” Last, in the closing scene in the hospital, Carlotta walks up to Officer Snow and takes his hand in gratitude and respect. The opera closes as the couple is now safely reunited.

Special mention should be made of Francesca Zambello for the skillful direction of the opera, to Edward Rom, who was responsible for the effective and beautiful set, especially the snow and moon scenes, and to Mark McCullough, who provided the expressive lighting. Last, we thank Jeanine Tesori for composing and conducting the beautiful score, and to Tony Kushner, who continues to add to his great achievements, for writing this moving story.

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