

What's playing in Santa Fe?

Opera season winds up with mixed bag of terror, starry love, comedy

By Ifan Payne

contributing reviewer

Santa Fe, N.M.—The highlight of the Santa Fe Opera's summer season, which ends next weekend, is the new production of "The Turn of the Screw."

In adapting Henry James' short novel, composer Benjamin Britten and librettist Myfanwy Piper may have created the most powerful portrayal of terror in opera.

The story concerns a governess who is employed to look after two children in a country house. The ghosts of two former employees seek to seduce the children, and much of the power of the plot lies in its ambivalence about the ghosts' reality: Of the adults, only the governess can see them.

One of the challenges in staging "The Turn of the Screw" lies in translating the ghosts, which may be figments of the governess's imagination, into the flesh and blood of operatic characters. The power of the Santa Fe production

was based largely on that translation from imagination to reality.

At first, the jumbled assembly of white flats, humps and gravel strewn about the stage boded ill. Robert Israel's set functioned awkwardly during the opening sequences of everyday life at Bly House, but as the opera progressed and David Alden's staging became more abstract and stylized, set and action became fused.

Sheri Greenawald was realistically neurotic as the Governess, singing forcefully but with an attractive tone. As Peter Quint, Michael Myers—a tenor who seems to be Jon Vickers' heir apparent and is a better actor than the older singer—evoked comparisons with Peter Pears, for whom Mr. Britten wrote the part.

Mary Jane Johnson's portrayal of Miss Jessel was well sung and strongly characterized. Edo de Waart conducted with imagination and brilliance, bringing out the detail and dramatic colorations of Mr. Britten's orchestra-

tion. The orchestra played with precision and virtuosity.

Two more fine young singers were heard in "Orione" by baroque composer Pietro Francesco Cavalli. The opera, presented in a realization by conductor Raymond Leppard, concerns the entangled loves of Orion, Diana, Amore and Venus. It ends sadly for Orion but happily for stargazing humans, as the mythical hero is killed and transformed into a constellation.

As Orion, tenor Neil Rosenheim provided the handsome but slow-moving production with much-needed spark and passion. Baritone David Parsons, who cuts a heroic figure onstage, was effectively typecast as Titan. This is a small role, but the fine singer and actor made the most of his opportunities.

Mr. Leppard drew lush but uninteresting sounds from the string orchestra. Despite the attractive sets and costumes, director Peter Wood emphasized the *longueurs* of this baroque rarity by confin-

ing much of the action to the front of the stage and most of the singers to facing the audience.

Different problems plagued the directionless (pun intended) production of "Arabella," an attractive but underrated comedy by Richard Strauss and Hugo von Hofmannsthal. Mark Lamos moved the singers around pointlessly, and John Conklin's scenery was unrelated in scale. The third-act set looked uncomfortably like a backstage storage bay.

Nevertheless, the emotional appeal of the music made itself felt thanks to John Crosby's sound conducting, the full-bodied playing of the Santa Fe Opera Orchestra and fine singing by Sheryl Woods (as Zdenka), Ellen Shade (as Arabella), Ann Howard (as Adelaide) and Victor Braun (as Mandryka).

The two other productions this season at Santa Fe are Offenbach's "Orpheus in the Underworld" and Donizetti's "Don Pasquale."