

OperaNow

July/August 2006

Darkling

AMERICAN OPERA
PROJECTS

Darkling, premiered by American Opera Projects, is not really an opera, but a theatrical adaptation of a book-length poem by Anna Rabinowitz that includes singers, actors, text, music, video, recorded voices and sound effects. The poem itself is a multi-layered evocation of the Holocaust, and the additional elements, as conceived and directed by Michael Comlish, add still more layers.

The basic story is simple: a young Polish couple marries in 1928; the wife flees to America and her husband follows her. Their marriage is unhappy - we are not sure why - but at least they are alive. The family members they leave behind perish.

Text from the poem is spoken and sung. It is also projected on the translucent black fabric walls of the box inside which the action takes place (Glenn Reed designed the set; Brian H Scott the lighting, Anna Kiraly the period black costumes, all of which were elegant and affecting). Letters, recollections and images whiz by, sometimes fractured beyond meaning and overwhelming in their quantity. People dressed in black underwear seem to be making a movie; a family welcomes the Sabbath; later, middle-class Jews are rounded up to the sound of gunshots while we see projected images of New York's Mayor Fiorello LaGuardia and



Richard Termine

American Opera Projects' Darkling

the World's Fair. Not surprisingly, the most powerful moments are built around tragedy: in the round-up, there's a desperate aria about coats, and after the prisoners die in the gas chamber, a recorded voice recites a grim version of the Passover song 'Dayenu' ('It would have been sufficient') and the lights go up on the stage, which is now populated only by empty shoes.

Stefan Weisman's instrumental score, played by the Flux Quartet, had the bleak urgency of Shostakovich crossed with Jewish liturgical idioms, but it was used too much like background music for all that text. When the five singers actually got to sing, they slowed down the words and gave them more weight, especially the eloquent mezzo Hai-Ting Chinn, soprano Jody Sheinbaum, and bass-baritone Mark Uhlemann, who sang the coat aria. Tenor Jon Garrison sported a rabbinical white beard and baritone

Marcus DeLoach sang the somewhat incongruous finale: a setting by Lee Hoiby of Hardy's *The Darkling Thrush*. Commissioned for the production, the song added an optimistic conclusion, but its simple, limpid tunefulness, to say nothing of its message, seemed out of character with the rest of the music and with the period of the production. Finally, there is nothing that one can say after the Holocaust. It is also hard for artists to find anything new to say about it. The power of *Darkling* is in its sophisticated execution; but it is an exercise of remembrance above all.

HEIDI WALESON