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Nixon in Vancouver: a triumphant visit

The Globe and Mail, Canada

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Vancouver, Mar. 14, 2010

- Vancouver Opera
- John Adams's *Nixon in China*
- Queen Elizabeth Theatre

At the end of the last act of John Adams's opera *Nixon in China*, the character Chou En-lai asks: "How much of what we did was good?" We may not be able to answer that question as it refers to the political events in the opera. But ask it of this particular production of *Nixon in China*, by Vancouver Opera, and it's easily answered. What you did was good, very good indeed.

Nixon in China, which takes as its point of departure Nixon's groundbreaking visit in 1972, has been a long time coming to Canada. Pierre Trudeau may have gotten to China a year earlier than Nixon did, but Adams's opera, which premiered in 1987 at Houston Grand Opera, has never been this far north before. This production, conducted by John DeMain (who also conducted the world premiere in Houston), and directed by Michael Cavanagh, is new. Planned during the recession, it was a financial stretch for Vancouver Opera. It is also a stunning production.

A lot has changed in global East-West relations since that first official attempt at detente, but Alice Goodman's graceful, intelligent libretto, which emphasizes both the human side of these larger-than-life and somewhat caricatured figures, and their immense capacity to misunderstand one another, does not seem at all outdated. The language is poetic, sometimes abstract, often epigrammatic: We don't always know what the characters mean either, although we get closer to them through the music. Adams's signature brand of pop-rock minimalism breezes through dozens of stylistic references, from Wagner operas to sentimental Hollywood movie scores, and it never drops its pulse or repeats an orchestral texture, however intricate, once it has moved on. It also has incredible momentum, encyclopedic variety, unexpected emotional resonance, plenty of bad taste and a sense of humour – just like the characters do.

These have been brilliantly cast. From the first moments of baritone Robert Orth's descent down the steps of designer Erhard Rom's life-sized (albeit stylized) Air Force One jet, he *is* Richard Nixon: The hunched shoulders, used-car salesman's smile; the fawning, dog-like efforts to impress; and the paranoid facial mannerisms all ring true. So does Orth's singing. His diction was immaculate, and each syllable was masterfully inflected. Dissimulation, weakness, pride and, ultimately, pathos: All co-existed uneasily in Orth's multifaceted characterization.

Baritone Chen-Ye Yuan's Chou En-lai was remarkable for both the gravity of his portrayal and the voluptuous beauty of his singing, both of which helped confirm Chou as the moral centre of the opera. Alan Woodrow's superb Mao grabbed at each of Nixon's verbal banalities and brutalized them, squeezing out his high notes at heldentenor pressure as if his obtuse philosophizing could be made wise through pure force of will. And bass baritone Thomas Hammon's Kissinger was physically and psychologically convincing: sly and dangerous on the one hand, stooge on the other.

In the role of Madame Mao (this opera's Queen of the Night), soprano Tracy Dahl found the perfect vehicle for her pealing, stratospheric range and dynamo presence. And while Sally Dibblee's Pat Nixon was not quite as warm as her music leads one to expect, a certain shrillness in the top notes did lend an appropriate neurotic edge to her character.

Cavanagh's direction was outstanding, from the intoxicated mayhem in the banquet scene to the little touches of humour that brightened and humanized the opera all evening. Nixon's gleeful soft shoe on the steps of the jet, Kissinger's perverse participation in Madame Mao's propaganda ballet – so brilliantly (and comically) choreographed by Wen Wei Wang in a dizzy hodgepodge of classical ballet, kung fu and Hollywood hyperbole, Nixon's awkward attempts to be affectionate with his wife, and the artful movements of the chorus in the crowd scenes were all perfectly calculated, and deftly realized.

In fact this opera succeeds so well on so many levels that Chou's question might as well be rephrased as an exclamation: "How much of what we did was good!"

The Vancouver Opera's production of Nixon in China.

Vancouver Sun

David Gordon Duke

March 15, 2010

Photographs by: Tim Matheson, Special to the Sun, Vancouver Opera

With a bit of help from the Cultural Olympiad, Vancouver Opera offered the first of four performances of John Adams's 1987 opera *Nixon in China* at the Queen Elizabeth Theatre Saturday. The demanding work's very first Canadian production is a brilliantly effective one.

Over a complex three hours, singers, designers, and a very hard-working orchestra (under the direction of John DeMain) are all pushed to their limits; and so, frankly, is the audience. In ingenious postmodern fashion, Adams and librettist Alice Goodman stand operatic conventions on their heads while employing tried-and-true ideas to give the work its solid dramatic underpinnings.

Much of the immediate appeal of Nixon comes from set pieces, which hark back to operatic styles of the 19th century or earlier. A post-modern fondness for sly quotations and pastiche are also part of the game: You don't have to recognize these references to enjoy the evening, but it adds considerably if you do. There are plenty of flashy entertainment values — just as, goodness knows, there are in Verdi or Wagner — but the overall purpose is thoughtful and serious, an exploration of the ethics and morality of politics and the men and women who practice them.

A good deal of this production's impact is thanks to the incisive work of designer Erhard Rom and clever projections by Sean Nieuwenhuis. For once the wide open spaces of the mammoth Queen E stage contribute to a sense of geopolitical monumentality. Most of the stage effects exude a cool elegance; several are magical.

The six principals play out the musical hands they've been dealt with striking commitment. The part of Chinese premier Chou En-lai, the most poetic and lyrical, is given a dignified but slightly stiff delivery by Chen Ye Yuan; Thomas Hammons makes the most of Chou's counterpart Henry Kissinger, his strong bass-baritone voice balanced by an equally strong presence. As Chairman Mao, tenor Alan Woodrow draws a massive part, heroically conceived and vocally taxing, latent with both menace and pathos.

Sally Dibblee embodies Pat Nixon, the most essentially likable of the characters, with cool authority. Vocal fireworks are the province of soprano Tracy Dahl, whose show-stopping da capo aria "I am the wife of Mao Tse-tung" brings the second act to a chilling close. They form a strong, cohesive ensemble. But baritone Robert Orth in the title role deserves special mention: His voice seems made for Adams's music. His physical characterization is unnervingly accurate; his clear and unaffected diction perfectly conveys Goodman's wordy but rich texts.

Although the dramatic events of Nixon do unfold along a supposedly realistic timeline, the work follows a surreal logic, incorporating strategic layers, contradictions, and paradoxes.

The heart of the first act is a showcase for male voices, beginning with Nixon's hyper-active "News" aria, followed by the complicated and didactic first meeting between President and Chairman; then the silliness of a great state banquet (an allusion to all those drinking scenes in all those operas) brings down the curtain.

The second act starts lightly, with a sort of scherzo suggested by the theme of the political good wife on her tedious meet-and-greets; then Pat Nixon's wonderful "This is prophetic!" aria gives Dibblee her most impressive moments. Here the set piece is a multi-layered ballet sequence (nicely mounted by choreographer Wen Wei Wang and a small company of impressive dancers) that mocks derivative Red Chinese agitprop while revealing its intrinsic banality and malevolence.

The third act is the toughest: a recapitulation of earlier ideas told through the private domestic histories of the Maos and the Nixons. In opera terms this is an extended ensemble finale, in which quintet morphs into trio, then paired duets. Characters present their own senses of personal pasts, often with simultaneous dialogue.

Nixon's conclusion is both theatrically subtle and musically sophisticated. After all that ensemble complexity, a lone Chou En-lai muses in a quiet, lyric soliloquy, stretched over ravishingly insubstantial orchestra textures, as Adams's fantasia on themes of recent history crystallizes into cultural memory.







Tricky Dick, operatic Everyman

Robert Everett-Green

The Globe and Mail Update Published

Mar. 12, 2010 1

When the baritone playing Richard Nixon made his first entrance during the New York premiere of *Nixon in China* in 1987, the audience laughed. The meaning of that laughter has everything to do with what made John Adams's opera an arresting piece when it was new, and with its current status as one of the key English-language operas of the 20th century.

In 1987, the real Nixon was still around, still trying to insinuate himself into the body politic (Newsweek ran a cover story in 1986 entitled *He's Back: The Rehabilitation of Richard Nixon*). Suddenly, there he was on the opera stage, flashing his big two-armed salute from the doorway of Air Force One as if Watergate had never happened.

When director Peter Sellars first suggested an opera based on Nixon's 1972 meeting with Mao Zedong, Adams thought he was joking. And even when the piece was done (it took two years to put Adams's music together with Alice Goodman's well-researched libretto), the trip, while historic, seemed too recent to be treated historically. Nixon was surely too scarred and banal a figure to carry an opera. Even when we knew that he had been mobilized to do just that, his character's appearance on the stage of the Brooklyn Academy of Music looked hilariously improbable.

Flash-forward two decades. Except for Henry Kissinger (the opera's only completely unsympathetic character), all the principals are dead. Memories of Nixon have faded, but his foibles and failings remain vivid enough to drive a recent hit play and movie, *Frost/Nixon*. China's global economic importance makes Nixon's 1972 expedition (which happened a full five years before the United States and China opened formal diplomatic relations) look incredibly prescient, enough to float a book devoted to the trip: Canadian historian Margaret MacMillan's recent *Nixon in China*. And Adams's opera is coming in for reassessment and revivals, including Vancouver Opera's current new production (a Canadian debut, opening tonight), and the Canadian Opera Company's revival next season of the six-company co-production recorded live in 2008 by Opera Colorado (on Naxos).

The opera contains a few laughs at Nixon's expense, but none of them are cheap. Goodman and Adams decided not to write a satire, but a heroic opera, in poetic couplets and music that would convey a kind of stature on the principals that they didn't necessarily have in real life.

Goodman's version of Nixon was, as Adams recently put it, "our presidential Everyman: banal, bathetic, sentimental, paranoid." His first big number, after shaking Premier Zhou Enlai's hand in the opening scene, is an excited reflection on how the encounter will look on American TV. But Adams's music for him mostly sounds sincere, and sometimes implies depths of tenderness that the real Nixon never showed in public. Nixon's wife, Pat, a virtually mute figure during her decades as a political spouse, becomes in the opera an eloquent witness of the mystical wonders of ordinary things. It's as if Emily Dickinson had been shut up inside the White House, and suddenly got a chance to go sightseeing in China.

When the opera came out, comparisons were made with the topical German *zeitoper* of the twenties and thirties, one of which (Paul Hindemith's *Neues vom Tage*) is about the culture of celebrity, and even seems to anticipate reality TV. But as musicologist Richard Taruskin writes in

his *Oxford History of Western Music*, “in the disillusioned aftermath of World War I, audiences enjoyed an operatic genre that debunked the myth of ‘timeless’ art. In the super-affluent, triumphant post-Cold War decade, audiences sought, through art, the monumentalization of their own historical experience.”

In other words, Adams and Goodman wrote the kind of opera that their audience wanted, without resorting to the usual expedient of doing something that sounds sort of like Verdi or Puccini. The chugging arpeggios and rippling scales of Adams’s minimalist craft drive several scenes, and are seldom absent altogether. But he also lets his lyrical muse run free. Listening to the recent live recording by Opera Colorado, I was struck by how much beautiful music Pat Nixon (soprano Maria Kanyova) gets to sing while she tours a model farm.

During Nixon’s meeting with Mao, the old Cold War enemies slip into a weird mist of fraternity that clears only at moments of piercing disagreement. “History is our mother,” Nixon sings, to which Mao harshly replies, “History is a dirty sow: If we by chance escape her maw / She overlies us.” The Nixons’s touristic interest in a performance of the ballet *The Red Detachment of Women* turns into something like terror when Madame Mao seems about to convert the show into a real revolutionary incident. Personality, incident and historical symbolism come together in a way that never happens in the many 19th-century operas about real kings and queens.

The passage of time has inflicted a few new ironies on the piece. “Founders come first, then profiteers,” Mao sings, and Nixon thinks he’s making a dig at American capitalism. It sounds quite different now that China’s hybrid economy supports at least 130 billionaires. That revolution would have happened if Nixon had never gone to China. But by doing so, he gave us a resonant media event, a symbol of things to come, and the subject for an opera that has never been more topical.