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OPERA REVIEW

OPERA REVIEW; A True Femme Fatale, Set Down in 50's Suburbia

By JEREMY EICHLER

MUNICH, July 5— Alban Berg's expressionistic masterpiece "Lulu" is a shattering work about the quintessential femme fatale, her mysterious charms, her litany of victims and her ultimate destruction in a world whose rules and hypocrisies she could never suffer. The score brims with the kind of lush and ravishing 12-tone music that only Berg could write, but he left it unfinished at his death in 1935.

Today, while less popular than his "Wozzeck," it has a firm place in the repertory, popping up occasionally at the Met, and in April the Bavarian State Opera introduced a production by David Alden. Mr. Alden's staging returned on Sunday to the company's elegant National Theater as part of its bustling summer festival.

Based on Wedekind's proto-expressionist tragedies, "Lulu" is full of characters driven (and riven) by their own base and unquenchable instincts. They don't interact as much as they ricochet around as if trapped in a giant Freudian pinball machine. Of course the dramatic and psychological forces that animate this opera are hardly limited to the late 19th-century Europe of Berg's original, and Mr. Alden has apparently taken this as license to transport the work far, far away.

He has reset it in a nightmarish corner of American suburbia in or around the 1950's, so the original first scene in a painter's studio is now a sleazy photo shoot, the Parisian salon is an airport terminal, and Lulu meets her tragic fate not in a London garret but in a car in a deserted suburban parking lot.

The updating is not quite as jarring as it sounds, partly because "Lulu" has always been such a shockingly modern work. Mr. Alden and his set designer, Giles Cadle, have indeed produced some arresting stage images. Still, one struggles at times to grasp the spirit of Berg's original amid all the transposed contexts and layers of arcane symbolism. This is after all a work with plenty of musical and dramatic complexity even before any big directorial ideas come into play.

And some of Mr. Alden's touches seem to run against the grain. For example he takes the ubiquitous portrait of Lulu that is meant to capture her at the height of her youthful beauty and

replaces it with a gruesome photo of Lulu covered in blood. The story's tragic end, he seems to say, was determined by its beginning. Perhaps, but in making that argument, the director risks sacrificing the pleasures of Lulu's ascent, however short-lived, and the subsequent drama of her fall.

On Sunday night the cast was anchored by Margarita De Arellano in an excellent performance as Lulu, infusing Berg's soaring spiky vocal lines with great lyricism and dramatic intensity. She had plenty of fine support from Franz Mazura as Schigolch, Tom Fox as Doctor Schön, John Daszak as Alwa, and Katarina Karnéus as the Countess Geschwitz.

Michael Boder led the Bavarian State Orchestra in the pit. His reading was technically cogent but stopped short of achieving that surging quality and radiant sheen that can make this work so memorable, long after any stage pictures -- period or modern -- have faded away.

Photo: Margarita De Arellano in Berg's "Lulu," at the Bavarian State Opera. (Photo by Wilfried Hösl)

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