MUSICALAMERICA.COM

Print or use Ctrl-P to print this page.

Reuse this article.

A Very Weird 'Lulu' at Munich Opera Fest

By Shirley Fleming
Musicalamerica.com
July 13, 2004

MUNICH -- It's a reasonable guess that the Bavarian State Opera is one of the busiest companies, if not *the* busiest, in the world. Going full speed for some 300 days a year, its grand final annual flourish is the July-August Munich Opera Festival, a seven-week affair in which all the year's new productions are included and which draws possibly 100,000 customers. General director Sir Peter Jonas, on the job since 1993 and planning to retire after two more seasons, can't resist a sly smile when he says, "The house is ninety-seven-and-a-half percent full every night, which is extremely rewarding." He also points out that box office covers 40 percent of the company's income -- a figure way above the norm.

He makes the accomplishment sound almost routine. "The Bavarian State Opera is the grand old lady of European companies, and the musical values were so high when I came that I wondered what I might be able to do. I was asked to do three things: broaden the repertory, make the company as productive as possible, and make it as accessible as possible. So I set about doing what I could." Over the years, he has commissioned 11 "big" works (Henze, Penderecki, Reimann are among the composers) and eight more modest ones. With the advantages of state subsidy, he mentions the opportunity to lead public taste rather than being forced by dependence on private donors to follow it. And audience reaction? "There may be boos," he says, "the public is always divided."

There were no boos during my brief visit last week, which netted an old production of "Otello," a spare but functional new one of "Die Meistersinger," and weird new "Lulu" in a modern, cartoon-like production by David Alden.

It was hard to tell whether Alden was staging a send-up of Berg's work or attempting to present a new angle on Lulu herself, as a petulant infantile sex-kitten who punches her teddy bear when having tantrums, grudgingly vacuums the carpet after marrying the painter (largely concerned with writing on his laptop), and makes jelly sandwiches after discovering him dead in the next room. In Act II Dr. Schön practices his golf swing in his living room, shortly before Lulu shoots him. The action often flies far afield from Wedekind's play; the original Act III Paris party takes place in an airport lounge, with hordes of holiday beach-goers attempting to reach their plane (one assumes) but held back by guards; a menacing steward in dark glasses knocks people down from time to time, occasionally kicking them. And suddenly, after all the high jinks, comes the opera's final scenes and a quick spin into Realism: Lulu's room in the London slums could not have looked nastier, or the final murders more bloody.

"Lulu" as comedy? "Lulu" as commentary on contemporary suburban life? "Lulu" as character study? Possibly all three.

Whatever the answer, visually the production was bright, smart and apt. Giles Cadle's realistic and colorful sets open up with a car onstage and comfortable middle-class houses in the background (the car will eventually be the scene of Lulu's murder). Lulu's various dwellings before her downfall look comfortably normal, and the airport lounge, under glaring fluorescent lights, could almost be the real thing.

The cast was brilliant. Margarita De Arellano negotiated Lulu's perilous vocal peaks without a qualm, projecting peevish sexuality and displaying a figure to die for (she also moves with a dancer's skill). Katarina Karneus's Countess Geschwitz became increasingly distraught as the action progressed -- never, however, losing vocal focus. John Daszak was a brash young Alwa, Will Hartmann radiated vigor and eagerness as the painter (portrayed in this production as a photographer). In the roles of Dr. Schön and Jack the Ripper, Tom Fox dominated the stage