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OPERA NEWS

Der Kaiser von Atlantis

NEW YORK CITY

Opera Moderne

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The show started in the lobby in Opera Moderne's production of Viktor Ullmann's *Kaiser von Atlantis*, seen on November 17 at New York's landmarked Czech Center (originally the Bohemian National Hall). Ticketholders were greeted by ushers costumed according to this production's Steampunk theme. They were then whisked by elevator up to the Czech Center's beautifully restored 1896 ballroom, a perfect jewel-box performance space for chamber opera.

Der Kaiser von Atlantis has attained the status of a modern classic in recent decades, due as much to its history as to its quality. Composed in the Nazi "show camp" Terezin (Theresienstadt) by the imprisoned Ullmann to a libretto by Peter Kien, it was meant to be staged inside the camp. But its pacifist message and clear caricature of a violent, egomaniacal dictator effectively prevented that, and Ullmann and Kien were sent straight to the gas chambers at Auschwitz–Birkenau. Although there have been numerous stagings of *Kaiser* in the U.S. since it was first rediscovered in 1975, its New York City performance history has been surprisingly spotty. With a cast of only seven characters, a chamber-sized orchestration and a brief one-hour running time, it would seem an ideal choice for small opera companies, of which the city has several. The enterprising Opera Moderne was wise to mount it; the work fits in well with this group's mission to produce rarely performed works with an eye toward developing new audiences for opera, particularly through the collaborative input of artists from outside the opera world.

With its eclectic, cabaret-style score, allegorical characters and abstract setting, *Der Kaiser von Atlantis* lends itself to a variety of interpretive choices. Its story of Death deciding to go on strike during the middle of a raging war can be set in virtually any time or place. Opera Moderne brought director Markus Kupferblum in from Vienna, where he founded the Totales Theater company; he and his creative team clothed *Der Kaiser* in the fashionable Steampunk aesthetic, with its visual references to the Industrial Revolution and Jules Verne fantasies of the 1870s and '80s. It was an inspired choice, one that lent enormous visual appeal that also reflected the playful wit in Ullmann's score. Dusters, ribboned medallions, aviator goggles, stopwatches and derbies abounded in Angela Huff's costume design; the Kaiser watched the war's carnage on a big contraption that was a kind of ornate 1870s version of television. (The set was minimal, though Timothy Bradshaw bore the credit for "Set/Large Prop Design.") The stage apron was extended into the audience for greater intimacy. Kupferblum's take on the opera successfully mixed irreverence with pathos; his only misstep was the number of times he had

the music stop completely so that his singers could engage in pantomime that added little and broke the score's flow. Ransom Wilson, who did a superb job of directing the ensemble known as Le Train Bleu, should have put his foot down and said "no" to this.

This production boasted a well-honed cast of young singing actors. In the title role, Vince Vincent sounded somewhat dry of tone, but he made up for it in his exquisitely physicalized performance. Every muscle in his body and face seemed to be expressively, thoughtfully deployed in service to the libretto and score. Imposing bass Jeffrey Tucker boomed sepulchrally as Death, and Brian Downen wielded a penetrating high tenor as Harlekin. Elspeth Davis handled the wide-ranging role of the Drummer with ease; it would have been nicer if she had not been encouraged to do so much mugging. Tenor James Baumgardner and soprano Gan-ya Ben-gur Akselrod sang sweetly and made an engaging pair of lovers in their short amount of stage time together. In the role of the Loudspeaker — who, in human form, is a factotum for the Kaiser as well as a narrator reminiscent of *Die Dreigroschenoper's* Street Singer — baritone Kelvin Chan sang with fine oaken tone and established a strong, charismatic rapport with the audience and his fellow singers. □

ERIC MYERS
