

Barkhatov's Drunk, Mad Hoffman at Mariinsky

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Mariinsky soloists and orchestra were at their best, but the comic staging of this tale are unlikely to please all. **Natasha Razina**

ST. PETERSBURG — Director Vasily Barkhatov's fondness for Mariinsky Theater tenor Sergei Semishkur is manifested in two ways. One is that the singer tends to appear in lead roles in most productions Barkhatov stages at the Mariinsky, and the other one is a little more unusual — Semishkur's characters inevitably have a strong drunken streak. Take, for instance, the gambler Nozdryov in Rodion Shchedrin's "Dead Souls," who is depicted as a typical Russian nouveau riche at a drunken sauna party that gets out of hand, complete with female models in towels, grabbing their lingerie in a hurry as they desert the place. Then there is his role as the constantly boozing peasant Steva in Leos Janacek's "Jenufa." With the arrival of the new staging of Jacques Offenbach's "Les Contes d'Hoffmann" (The Tales of Hoffmann), which premiered at the Mariinsky Theater on Dec. 26 and 27, audiences were treated to an alcohol-fuelled rendition of Hoffmann — performed by Semishkur.

"The Tales of Hoffmann" — unfinished at the time of Offenbach's death and completed by Ernest Guiraud — first saw the stage at the Opera-Comique in Paris in 1881.

Since then, the piece — a romantic, magical tale about a poet caught in the eternal dilemma of choosing between his muse and a romantic relationship — has enjoyed much attention from opera directors around the world.

In Barkhatov's show, Hoffmann suffers from severe schizophrenia. The director's main goal was to visualize the parallel realities co-existing in the tormented man's mind. The audience witnesses the many scenes taking place in Hoffmann's disorganized and delusional mind.

In Act II, a video played at the back of the stage shows a young slim beauty dancing in a summer field. This is an image of Hoffmann's beloved, the doll Olympia, portrayed by actress Polina Tolstun. At the same time, Mariinsky soprano Larisa Yudina was on stage as Olympia. Her performance was limited to standing in the far right corner and singing an aria. Finally, in the center of the stage we see the poor mental patient, Hoffmann, dressed in a white robe, dancing with a nurse and wearing bizarrely shaped goggle-like glasses. At this point, the audience may well be overwhelmed with sympathy for almost everyone, including the singers, the composer, the poor lunatic himself, the mentally disturbed and a rather large number of fellow spectators forced into joining Hoffmann in this ordeal.

In the beginning, viewers may suspect that Hoffmann's three loves — the doll Olympia, the singer Antonia and the courtesan Giulietta — are nothing but incarnations of one woman, Stella. But there is barely a hint in the director's work linking the three, and nothing in the production prompts viewers to sense a possible connection — either in the characters' outlooks or in their stage personalities — although this may be what those familiar with the libretto wanted to see.

Barkhatov's production certainly contrasts with the Mariinsky's previous version of the opera, staged by Martha Domingo in 2000.

Domingo broke no new ground, yet managed to create a most enchanting staging — a co-production with the Washington Opera and the Los Angeles Opera, where her husband served at the time as artistic director — with only some slight touches of the occult, making for fine opera entertainment with no excessive mystification and more of an illustrative twist, rather than a philosophical approach. The scenery — designed by Giovanni Agostinucci — was elaborate and ornamental, and was well-suited to Domingo's artistic goals.

In Barkhatov's staging, both vocally and musically, the Mariinsky soloists and the company's symphony orchestra under the baton of Valery Gergiev demonstrated their most-inspired best. Semishkur brought rage and charisma to one of the most vocally challenging tenor roles ever, turning Hoffmann into a ravishing madman. Soprano Oksana Shilova convincingly played the dying singer Antonia, turning her heroine into something of a neoclassical Italian film character. Soprano Yekaterina Solovyova triumphed as the epitome of glamour and manipulation as Giulietta, who goads Hoffmann into granting her his shadow. Bass-baritone Ildar Abdrazakov excelled in the roles of evil characters — Lindorf, Coppelius, Doctor Miracle and Dappertutto — bringing some gorgeous, ghastly charm to the stage that partly justified the director's treatment of Offenbach, which was in other respects pitiless.

The most puzzling part of Barkhatov's approach to the opera is his surprising lack of sensitivity to what is one of the most delicate and mesmerizingly magical scores in the history of opera. Treating intricate magic as laugh-out-loud comedy sketches straight from a college party leaves viewers perplexed. It is like bringing luxurious flowing silk to a tailor and asking them to make you a dress, only to discover upon trying it on that it has been cut and fashioned as if it were sackcloth, not silk.

Comedy sketches can work wonders in opera, and they often do so, even in Barkhatov's production of "Dead Souls." Offenbach's operatic fairy tale was, however, clearly a mismatch for this kind of treatment. Perhaps it was wise of the Mariinsky not to show the premiere again over the lengthy New Year's holidays or immediately afterward: The induced hangover effects could be damaging. The delirious staging looks more likely to provide a sobering effect.

"The Tales of Hoffmann" next plays on Jan. 24 and Feb. 23 at the Mariinsky Theater, 1 Teatralnaya Ploshchad. St. Petersburg. Tel. (812) 326 4141. Metro Sennaya Ploshchad, Sadovaya. www.mariinsky.ru

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