

MOVIES, PERFORMING ARTS/WEEKEND DESK

NEXT WAVE FESTIVAL REVIEW; Giving Voice To an Act Of Terror

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All those entering the Brooklyn Academy of Music on Wednesday night had to empty their pockets and pass through metal detectors set up right inside the four doors to the spacious lobby. The reason behind the heightened security was the opening-night performance of John Adams's opera "The Death of Klinghoffer," which had its United States premiere in 1991 at the academy, six months after its world premiere in Brussels. The opera has come back to the academy in an arresting new production, with Robert Spano conducting the Brooklyn Philharmonic, that will be repeated tonight and tomorrow night at the Howard Gilman Opera House.

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Few works in recent years have ignited more controversy than this audacious, multilayered opera about the 1985 hijacking of the Achille Lauro, an Italian cruise ship, by a group of Palestinian terrorists, which resulted in the brutal murder of Leon Klinghoffer, a disabled American Jew. World events have intersected with each presentation of this work. As the critic Michael Steinberg points out in his liner notes for the 1992 Nonesuch recording, Mr. Adams began composing "The Death of Klinghoffer" in 1989, when the United States was lavishing support on Saddam Hussein. By the time of its 1991 premiere, he adds, America was "dropping 'smart bombs' down Baghdad ventilator shafts."

Just months after 9/11, the Boston Symphony Orchestra canceled a series of performances of excerpts from the opera, including the "Chorus of the Exiled Palestinians," in deference to a member of the Tanglewood Festival Chorus whose husband was on one of the planes that was crashed into the twin towers. As the work is presented again, the age-old hatreds in the Middle East continue to rage.

Most of those offended by the opera have pointed to what they consider its sanctification of the Palestinian struggle and its suspiciously sympathetic depiction of the terrorists. They have parsed Alice Goodman's libretto and analyzed Mr. Adams's music to uncover the supposed biases of the creators, including the director Peter Sellars, whose idea the opera was. Such reactions have brought anguish to these artists, who have never claimed any special insight into these intractable conflicts. Their opera, as they have said repeatedly, is a reflective work, more in the spirit of the passions of Bach, which mix storytelling and commentary, than a traditionally dramatic opera. Major events -- the takeover of the ship, the murder of Klinghoffer, who is pushed overboard in his wheelchair -- are not even enacted, only recalled.

This new production, described as a staged concert version, by the director Bob McGrath, in association with the Ridge Theater, may offer this opera its best chance to reach audiences in the way its creators intended. The filmmaker Bill Morrison and the visual designer Laurie Olinder have created film and still images -- a choppy ocean, an expansive sky, an arid desert, various elements of the ship -- that are projected on two scrims, one in the foreground, one in the background; for most of the opera, the singers and choristers are positioned between them. "The Death of Klinghoffer" emerges as a series of fleeting actions interspersed with subdued and despairing ruminations.

Ms. Goodman's poetic libretto digs through layers of crazed and ceaseless animosities to find the affecting human detail. There is the first monologue of the ship's captain, who berates himself for not having been wary of the Palestinians when they boarded the ship.

(One placed a sacred chain in his hand.) There is the soliloquy by the young hijacker Mamoud, who prizes his transistor radio -- his one glint of the West -- but does not like the news, he says, only the old songs whose stories are all the same: of lovers, partings, deaths of husbands in wars.

Most moving is the scene in Act II for Klinghoffer's wife, Marilyn, who has cared for her husband constantly, despite grappling with her own cancer. A bitter irony, conveyed unblinkingly by the opera, is that Klinghoffer is murdered during one of the few times that his wife, thinking he was being cared for, allowed herself 10 minutes to sit and relax.

Mr. Adams's score mostly flows by in undulant waves of shimmering tonal harmonies pierced with dissonance, elegiac melodic writing that threads through the orchestral textures, and choral episodes of parallel intervals that criss-cross in intricate contrapuntal patterns. At times this subdued score erupts in violent blasts, as in the "Chorus of Exiled Palestinians," which culminates with a fearsome vow to seek revenge on the Israeli supplanter who destroyed their villages, to "take the stones he broke and break his teeth."

Mr. Spano, who with these performances is making his last appearances as music director of the Brooklyn Philharmonic, drew a taut yet calm, clear-textured yet atmospheric account of the score from his palpably involved players.

The baritone James Maddalena, who created the role of the Captain, again gives a remarkable portrayal of a decent man who blames himself for his foolish innocence, singing with wistful warmth and crisp diction. The baritone Stephen Powell and the mezzo-soprano Nancy Maultsby as the Klinghoffers offer vocally assured and deeply affecting performances.

Nmon Ford and Todd Wilander deliver brave portrayals of the hijackers Mamoud and Molqi. The mezzo-soprano Phyllis Pancella is vibrant playing two passengers, a shocked Swiss grandmother and a privileged Austrian lady who sings in Schoenbergian Sprechstimme (Mr. Adams's one slip into facile caricature). The New York Virtuoso Singers bring clarity to the choral writing but are too few (24) to give the choruses the weight they ideally need.

No one will be able to dissuade those who believe that "The Death of Klinghoffer" puts a simplistic gloss on impossibly complex hatreds or that it is even tainted with anti-Semitism. For what it's worth, my companion on this occasion, a young Israeli psychiatrist and an army veteran who could explain why Palestinians would not be likely to carry M-16 rifles, as the singers do here, found the opera humane, perceptive and engrossing. Whatever your take, this ambitious and deeply felt work deserves to be heard and debated.