

Washington, September 2004. We went to see Giordano's "Andrea Chenier" not for its musical values, but because we had heard so much good things about the stage direction by Poland's Mariusz Trelinski. It turned out that the production surpassed our expectations musically, but was not up to them visually.

Granted, this is not a musical masterpiece, but has some good orchestration and several melodious arias. The choral and duet writing is not first-class – the latter are more like intertwined solo arias, with the two voices rarely singing together. The lead singers were quite good: Italian-Uruguayan tenor Carlo Ventre and Italian soprano Paoletta Marrocu, who seems to be a regular at Milan's La Scala.

Despite what the Washington Post review said, the staging neither razzled nor dazzled. It seemed overly static and for the most part not very imaginative. One scene was played in front of shimmering curtain of the type magicians use to hide their mechanics during illusions of levitation. The action takes place during the French Revolution, so there was the obligatory guillotine, festooned with arching strings of lightbulbs and lit in orange, reminding me of the Golden Gate Bridge. All in all, a pleasing enough production, but not up to the hype. Read the hype here:

<http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/articles/A17099-2004Sep12.html>

<http://www.washingtontimes.com/entertainment/20040912-113729-8911r.htm>

<http://www.baltimoresun.com/entertainment/music/bal-to.opera13sep13,1,4668339.story>

The very next day, we saw Britten's "Billy Budd." Now THAT was an experience! This is no romantic boy-meets-girl fluff along the lines of Boheme or Carmen, but a struggle of primal evil vs. good, like Tosca or Otello. The music is just wonderful – written in 1950, at a time when the musical world got over the turn-of-the century fashion of ugly atonality of Berg and Hindemith, and could even hark back to some of the melodiousness of Verdi (as in the lovely flute accompaniment to Billy's final aria). Every such drama needs a proper villain, such as Otello's Iago or Tosca's Scarpia, and here it was the ship's Master-at-Arms Claggert, who sets out to destroy lowly seaman Budd because he is well-liked by the crew. The role was wonderfully sung by legendary basso profundo Samuel Ramey. To some critics he seems past his prime, but to me his voice still sounds smooth and powerful, and he is a consummate stage actor. All of the other roles were equally satisfying, especially American baritone Dwayne Croft in the title role, and Robin Leggate of the Royal Opera Covent Garden as Captain Vere.

The stage production, from Covent Garden, was good. The unit set consisted of a platform that could be tilted down to represent above-deck, or up to reveal under-deck cabins, and that worked quite well. On deck, a mast with yard-arms and a matrix of ratlines completed the shipboard motif. What was disconcerting, however, was that the platform was very rectangular – had it been elliptical to represent a ship, it would have been perfect.

There were a couple of gripping moments in the staging. The battle with the French ship was well done, although economically – the crew just stared out over the audience and reacted to events described in song but unseen by the audience. This is an effect often used by Lerner & Loew in their musicals (joust in Camelot, horserace in My Fair Lady). After Claggert is killed, he lies there in a heap covered by a shroud, all the way through the lengthy scene of Billy's trial – poor Samuel Ramey, we thought. But wait – poor

Billy, after having been executed for killing Claggert, gets to hang by the neck (or so it seems) above the stage through the entire final scene and epilog.

The lighting was mostly dark and dreary throughout, which just fit the mood perfectly. Overall, a most satisfying operatic experience. We can recommend this opera wholeheartedly, if you get a chance to see it. Reviews:

<http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/articles/A34449-2004Sep19.html>

<http://www.washingtontimes.com/entertainment/20040920-104012-5527r.htm>

<http://www.baltimoresun.com/entertainment/music/bal-to.opera21sep21,1,4340657.story>