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PICTURE THIS: A NOSE ON THE LOOSE

By Anthony Tommasini



Sara Krulwich/The New York Times
Paulo Szot, with his runaway nose, as Kovalyov.

It has become commonplace at the Metropolitan Opera for directors and designers of new productions, especially modernist high-concept ones, to be lustily booed by a sizable contingent of the audience during opening-night ovations.



Sara Krulwich/The New York Times
A scene from “The Nose” at the Metropolitan Opera.

But on Friday night, when the Met introduced its production of Shostakovich’s early opera “The Nose,” based on the Gogol short story, the South African artist William Kentridge, who directed this production, helped design the sets and created the videos that animate the staging, received the heartiest bravos.

For the most part I shared this enthusiasm, though the bustling stage action and the busyness of the video elements are often distracting. Still, Mr. Kentridge belongs at the Met. As the company’s general manager, Peter Gelb has made it a priority to recruit directors from theater and film. With Mr. Kentridge, whose work can now be seen in an extensive exhibition at the Museum of Modern Art, Mr. Gelb has brought in a major visual artist. Stop-action animation and theatrical design are central to Mr. Kentridge’s work, and he has unleashed his imagination on Shostakovich’s bitterly satirical and breathless opera.

Musically you are not likely to hear a more insightful, ornery and, when appropriate, achingly poignant account of Shostakovich’s still-shocking score than the performance the conductor Valery Gergiev drew from the Met orchestra and chorus and the large cast: some 30 artists, singing about 80 solo roles. It was a breakthrough night for the baritone Paulo Szot in his Met debut as Kovalyov, the beleaguered petty bureaucrat who awakens one morning to find his nose missing.

This unconventional opera, which Shostakovich wrote at 22, had its premiere in St. Petersburg (then Leningrad) in 1930. The dissonant, brutal score was instantly condemned by Soviet authorities, and the work was not performed again in Russia until 1974. It is time to reassess this opera, and the Met deserves thanks for championing it.

Gogol's absurdist 1836 story hooked the immensely gifted and ambitious young Shostakovich. Its sorry hero, a former major and a humdrum collegiate assessor, finds himself inexplicably noseless. Suddenly he has no profile, and not just metaphorically, in St. Petersburg society. Setting out to find his missing part, Kovalyov spots it at a cathedral, human size and dressed as a state councilor, a superior to Kovalyov.

In many great operas composers have had to whittle down an epic literary work into a suitable libretto. In "The Nose" Shostakovich, who fashioned the libretto with three other writers, does the opposite. Gogol tells this baffling tale with disarming simplicity. When a police inspector presents Kovalyov with his missing nose, for example, the inspector explains in just a couple of sentences that he nabbed the culprit as it was trying to board a train out of the city.

To Shostakovich this brief exchange screamed out for operatic dramatization. Here it becomes an extended, hyperpaced choral ensemble with milling crowds, vendors, policemen and the fleeing nose. Shostakovich's tendency toward long-windedness is already evident, even though the opera lasts just 1 hour 45 minutes, and the Met, rightly, performs it without intermission.

Yet in scene after scene Shostakovich's music, scored for an orchestra pulsing with reedy woodwinds, snarling brasses and steely percussion, dazzles you: the sputtering, raspy harangue that the wife of the barber Ivan delivers when she discovers that her hopeless spouse has dropped someone's nose into the bread she has baked; the scene in which Kovalyov first appears, in the throes of an erotic dream, depicted with instrumental grunts and atonal groans; the wordless chorus at the cathedral that lends the bleak comedy a fleeting passage of mysticism. Shostakovich evokes frothy gallops, slithering waltzes and circus bands with a fractured modernist brilliance that equals Stravinsky's.

"The Nose" is the work of a young man eager to show off. The sheer complexity of the unwieldy score, rife with ensembles, becomes too much. Though Mr. Kentridge embraces that profusion, I like his production best when he counters the chaos by simplifying the staging and slowing down the animation.

Mr. Kentridge sets “The Nose” around the time of its 1930 premiere to explore themes of totalitarian oppression. The sets, which he designed with Sabine Theunissen, are covered with newsprint evoking a society drowning in propaganda. Intimate scenes take place in movable cubicles; crowd scenes fill the stage. There are captivating animated images. We see the Nose in various human guises: an entitled official strutting about town; a man plunging into a pool (giving literal meaning to the term nose dive).

Mr. Szot is best known for his Tony Award-winning performance as Emile de Becque in the Lincoln Center Theater production of “South Pacific.” No career move could have shaken up his public image more than taking on this daunting Russian role.

Kovalyov dominates the opera. There are moments of lyrical flight, and Mr. Szot made the most of them, singing with rich, virile sound and plaintive phrasing. But much of the part involves spans of quick-paced sung dialogue and calls for exhausting physical activity. Mr. Szot’s voice lacked some carrying power. Still, he sang with intelligence and stamina, and his natural charisma lent humanity to the confounded Kovalyov.

Andrei Popov, in his Met debut, had fun with the high tenor role of the sneering Police Inspector, singing with piercing, nasal comic intensity. Although the Nose mostly runs about the stage inside a papier-mâché costume, the character has one small, crucial sung scene, when it is confronted by the aggrieved Kovalyov. The lyric tenor Gordon Gietz, in his Met debut, sang it urgently. Here Mr. Kentridge wisely placed Mr. Gietz, dressed in a simple shirt and trousers, on a railing shrouded in the animated shadow of a big black nose.

The supporting singers, many taking on multiple roles, are too numerous to name. Standouts include Vladimir Ognovenko, as the barber Ivan; Claudia Waite, as his nagging wife; and Sergei Skorokhodov, as Kovalyov’s uppity servant.

Mr. Kentridge was clearly the darling of the evening. For me the hero was Shostakovich.

“The Nose” runs through March 25 at the Metropolitan Opera House, Lincoln Center; (212) 362-6000, metopera.org.

