Boston Sunday Globe

Date: Sunday, October 30, 2011
Location: BOSTON, MA
Circulation (DMA): 368,303 (7)
Type (Frequency): Newspaper (S)
Page: N2
Keyword: Boston Lyric Opera

Supernatural stagehands in a new 'Macbeth' from BLO

By Harlow Robinson
GLOBE CORRESPONDENT

Don't expect to see any kilts or bagpipes in the Boston Lyric Opera production of Giuseppe Verdi's "Macbeth" when it opens a five-performance run at the Citi Performing Arts Center Shubert Theatre on Friday. Not surprisingly, visiting director David Schweizer, still a noted theatrical enfant terrible after 40 years in the business, has something more provocative in mind.

This "Macbeth" has "a timeless contemporary feeling," he remarked in a recent phone interview during rehearsals. "It looks like something happening in the mid-20th century or right now, not sometime long ago."

And not in Scotland, either.

The set, designed by BLO's John Conklin, features not heaths, moats, and castles but a raked metallic platform projecting "a deserted industrial feeling." And how about the famous chorus of witches who open the action and reappear throughout to foretell disaster and mayhem for Macbeth and his cursed country? Here, they are actually running the show, like supernatural stagehands controlling the murderous actions of the principal characters.

"What's going on with the witches is always the big question," said Schweizer, who is directing Verdi's opera for the first time, but has several times staged the tragedy by William Shakespeare upon which it is based. "Shakespeare has three witches, but Verdi has three choruses of witches. We have taken his idea even further, to incorporate all the members of the chorus and everyone else onstage except Macbeth's immediate entourage into the witches' chorus. They play all the incidental roles — messengers, soldiers, refugees — without costume changes. The idea is that the witches are putting on a spectacle for themselves, a sort of laboratory experimenting with the darkest extremes of human behavior. They play with the Macbeths, putting them through their paces."

Schweizer's concept coincides with Verdi's: "Abide by the rule that the main roles of this opera are, and can only be, three: Macbeth, Lady Macbeth and the chorus of witches," he wrote in a letter to publisher Leon Escudier. "The witches dominate the drama; everything stems from them — rude and gossipy in Act I, exalted and prophetic in Act III. They make up a real character, and one of the greatest importance."

This is the second time Schweizer has worked at BLO. Last season, he mounted an acclaimed production of Viktor Ullmann's "The Emperor of Atlantis, or Death Quits." Schweizer has directed at major opera companies around the country, including the Glimmerglass Festival, where David Angus, BLO's music director, currently serves as music director. Angus will also be at the podium for "Macbeth."

Two newcomers to BLO will be taking the extremely challenging leading roles. Both are Americans. Baritone Daniel Sutin will be singing the role of Macbeth for the first time in his career. Dramatic soprano Carter Scott, as Lady Macbeth, has sung the part before, although she is better known for the role of Puccini's Princess Turandot, having sung it nearly 50 times in Germany.

For Sutin (pronounced Sutton), now 48 years old, Macbeth is a role "I've been waiting and wanting to do for a long time." As he explained recently, "The voice is like wine, it needs to age, and now is the right time for this role."

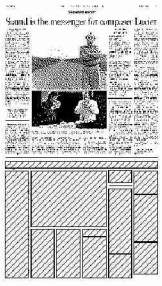
Like Scott, Sutin spent a number of years learning his craft in European opera houses — four seasons in Zurich and seven in Germany. He has also spent 10 years on the roster of the Metropolitan Opera in a variety of supporting roles. In recent years, he has taken the roles of several famous villains in other Verdi operas, including Rigoletto in the opera of the same name, and Iago in "Otello."

"I enjoy being a villain," he said. "They get some of the best music, and I can identify with the emotional complications of their characters. They are roles you can sink your teeth into. What I like about Macbeth is how he progresses from a sense of fear in the early scenes to becoming a pure and utter murderer at the end. His sexual relationship with Lady Macbeth is strong; he needs her both physically and mentally. There is a strong chemistry between them."

"Macbeth" is unusual because it lacks a leading role for a tenor. It was also the first of Verdi's several operatic adaptations of plays by Shakespeare, preceding "Otello" and "Falstaff." (Verdi was hardly the only opera composer to turn to Shakespeare. Another was Hector Berlioz, whose "Béatrice and Bénédict," based on "Much Ado About Nothing," opened the Opera Boston season two weeks ago.) First performed in Florence in 1847, when Verdi was 33 years old, "Macbeth" was substantially revised for a Paris performance in 1865.

From the outset, Verdi sought to create something worthy of Shakespeare's "Scottish play," believed to have been completed in 1606. "This tragedy is one of the greatest creations of man," he wrote to his librettist Francesco Maria Piave. "If we can't make something great out of it let us at least try and do something out of the ordinary."

Accordingly, the vocal writing is unconventional and highly dramatic, especially for Lady



Boston Sunday Globe

Date: Sunday, October 30, 2011
Location: BOSTON, MA
Circulation (DMA): 368,303 (7)
Type (Frequency): Newspaper (S)
Page: N2
Keyword: Boston Lyric Opera

Macbeth. Verdi specified that she should "look ugly and malignant," not beautiful, and that she should sing in a voice that is "rough, hollow, stifled," with "something devilish" in it. Lady Macbeth makes her first entrance in Act 1 not singing, but reading a letter. (Director Schweizer warned that he has a "surprise" for this scene that may not involve reading.)

In Act 4, Lady Macbeth has her famous sleep-walking scene, what Verdi scholar Julian Budden has called "a scene unique in all Italian opera of the time." Verdi sets the famous speech ("Out, damned spot! Out, I say!") in its Shakespearean entirety, against a spooky accompaniment of muted strings, English horn and clarinet, without the brighter wind instruments, climaxing on a high D-flat to be sung "un fil di voce" as she leaves the stage.

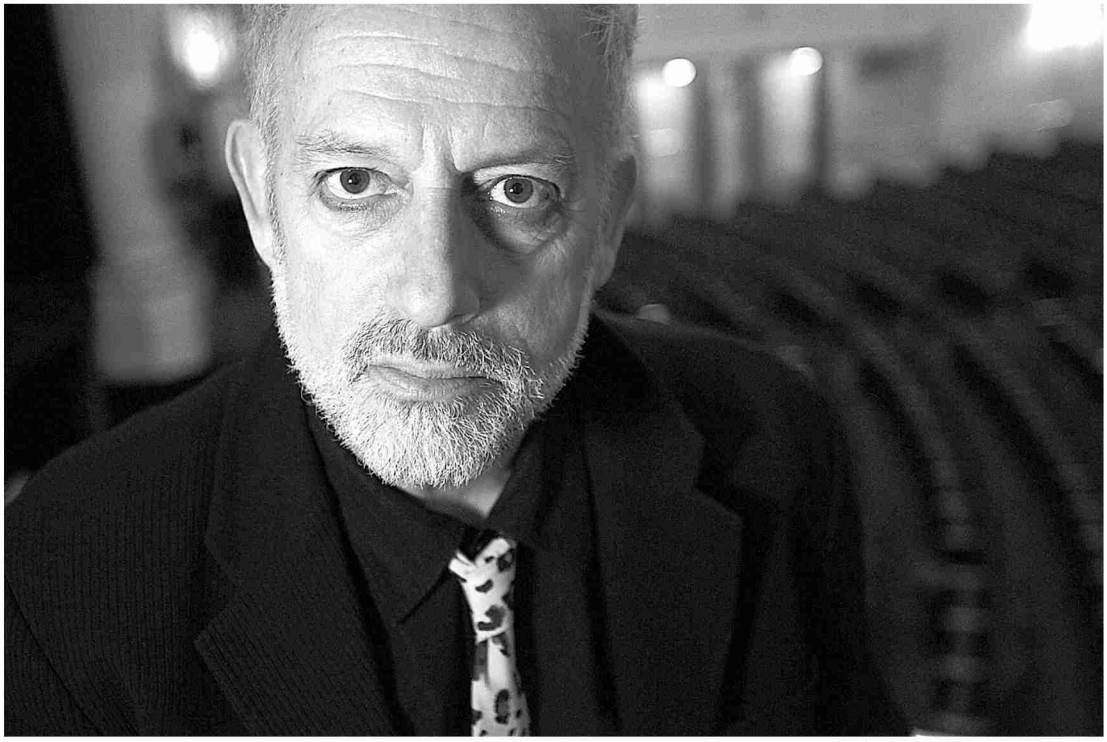
Scott admitted in a recent interview that she gets "a little morose when I'm doing Lady Macbeth. It's not a happy show, there's lots of blood and killing. So I tend to cut up in rehearsals to relieve the brooding. Lady Macbeth has very mature emotions, and there's no doubt that she is the one wearing the pants in the family. The pacing is challenging, because she sings a lot in the first two acts and then much less in the last two acts."

The cast and crew are well aware, of course, of the history of theatrical superstition surrounding productions of "Macbeth." So as not to invite bad luck, actors traditionally have been forbidden to speak the name of the play within the walls of a theater. If an actor should defy that prohibition, he or she is required by legend to leave the building, spin around three times, spit, curse, and then knock to be allowed back in.

According to Schweizer, these superstitions have never been quite as potent for "Macbeth" in the opera house. In any case, he reported, no untoward incidents had occurred at rehearsals — so far. But the director wasn't taking any chances. "I'm knocking on wood as I say this," he said with a nervous laugh.

Harlow Robinson can be reached at harlo@mindspring.com

VERDI: MACBETH
Boston Lyric Opera
At: Citi Performing Arts Center
Shubert Theatre
Nov. 4-13. Tickets: $32-$225.
617-542-4912. www.blo.org



SUZANNE KREITER/GLOBE STAFF

David Schweizer, director of Boston Lyric Opera's "Macbeth," says the production has "a timeless contemporary feeling."