

‘Makropulos’ at Mariinsky Is Resounding Success

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Yekaterina Popova’s singing enchantress Emilia Marty has the power to make any man she meets fall at her feet. **N. Razina**

ST. PETERSBURG — Opera singer Emilia Marty oozes so much enigma and drama that men fall at her feet after one glance, regardless of their age. It is not so much her stunning looks that they find attractive, or even her beautiful voice; it is what one of her admirers describes as “a terrible secret” and “a sense of danger.” His compliments begin to make sense when the audience discovers that the heroine is 337 years old.

The story of the never-aging singer is at the heart of Leos Janacek’s opera, “The Makropulos Affair,” which saw its premiere at the Mariinsky Theater last Friday. The creative force behind the production was renowned British director Graham Vick, who runs the Birmingham Opera Theater and has a wealth of experience in both opera and drama.

The director successfully created an eerie atmosphere, transporting the audience to a Miss

Marple-like realm. The intentionally bland if not deadly dull stage design — a plain-looking lawyer's office in which desks and shelves up to the ceiling represent the only furnishings in Act 1, or a single chair standing next to the stage entrance in Act 2 — works to the production's advantage, focusing the attention on the acting and Janacek's sensuous, expressionist score rendered magnificently by the Mariinsky Symphony Orchestra.

In the absence of Valery Gergiyev, the company's artistic director, who was on tour in the United States, the premiere was conducted by aspiring young conductor Mikhail Tatarnikov, already a regular with the Mariinsky Symphony Orchestra and one of the most promising up-and-coming conductors in the country. Tatarnikov makes the most of the orchestra in Janacek's neurotic and fidgeting score, which provides a striking contrast to the Czech composer's other exuberantly melodic operas born out of his fascination with Moravian folklore.

The musicians took the audience on an eerie journey into the emotional world of a woman who has had more love in her life than she could bear and has enjoyed too little happiness to wish to stay alive. Nothing appears to touch Emilia's heart any longer — even the news of the suicide of her young admirer, clumsy Janek Prus (Andrei Ilyushnikov) who has forsaken his lover, the young singer Christa (Marina Aleshonkova) only to find out about Emilia's affair with his own father Jaroslav (Sergei Romanov).

“The Makropulos Affair,” or “Vec Makropulos,” takes its name from the title of a legal battle over a disputed inheritance that has been going on for almost a century by the time the opera's story unfolds in Prague, in 1922. As the Prus and Gregor families fight over the money and Albert Gregor (Sergei Semishkur) humbly awaits his defeat in the case, he is stunned by the sudden appearance of a mysterious and striking opera diva (Yekaterina Popova), whose knowledge of the case is almost frightening.

The diva offers an unexpected helping hand to Albert by telling his lawyer where to find the last will of the deceased baron Prus, who left everything to Albert's ancestors. What the singer wants in return is a very old document in Greek, which, as the public learns later, is nothing less than a mysterious recipe for immortality that was created back in the 16th century for Emperor Rudolf II von Habsburg by his personal doctor, the royal alchemist Hieronymus Makropulos.

The doctor is ordered to test his elixir on his 16-year-old daughter, Elina, who falls into a long fever that unnerves the emperor but enables the girl to live for a full 337 years. But as the heroine points out, it is not easy to live that long while remaining in the public eye. Elina Makropulos has had to regularly change identities — Elsa Mueller, Ellian MacGregor, Yekaterina Myshkina, Eugenia Montez and finally, Emilia Marty.

In 1922, the effects of the elixir are fading, and Emilia needs another dose in order to stay alive.

The composer's most enigmatic opera, “The Makropulos Affair” is loosely based on the eponymous utopian play by Karel Capek.

Vick's production offers a strong focus on drama, with Popova as Emilia Marty confidence personified.

While in the original libretto, the dying Emilia bequeaths the manuscript to Christa, who then burns it, Vick made a good call by getting the singer to throw the recipe at the orchestra pit in a gesture of despair. The more caustic members of the audience were quick to suggest that the indefatigable Gergiyev had clearly missed out on a great opportunity.

“The Makropulos Affair” next shows at 7 p.m. on Nov. 12 at the Mariinsky Theater, 1 Teatralnaya Ploshchad. St. Petersburg. Tel: (812) 326-4141, www.mariinsky.ru .

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