

Fantastic Mr. Fox

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> North America



Opera San Antonio's *Fantastic Mr. Fox*, with Davis, Jonathan Blalock (Mole), John Dooley (Badger the Miner) and Brancy

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"Learn to walk before you run," Wisdom admonishes Youth. The fledgling Opera San Antonio took that advice to heart in choosing a small-scale work for its first fully staged production, but the walk proved to be less a tentative amble than a justifiably confident swagger.

The vehicle was *Fantastic Mr. Fox*, with music by the company's artistic

director, American composer Tobias Picker, and English-language libretto by Donald Sturrock, based on the children's book by Roald Dahl. Los Angeles Opera staged the work first, in 1998, in a version with full orchestra. Opera San Antonio mounted a chamber version with an orchestra of seven, conducted crisply by Andres Cladera. The production opened on September 23 in the Carlos Alvarez Studio Theater, a flexible space seating about 230 in the new Tobin Center for the Performing Arts.

The tale concerns a war between Mr. Fox and a trio of foul farmers whose fowl (and cider) Mr. Fox filches to feed his family. The farmers manage to separate him from his tail but not his life. Furious, they destroy the foxes' den with earth-moving equipment, but Mr. Fox outwits them in alliance with other forest creatures, who gather for a feast at the farmers' expense.

Sturrock's libretto is a shade less dark than Dahl's book, which gives greater emphasis to the foxes' desperation as starvation looms. The libretto introduces new characters in the form of the farmers' tractor (Mavis) and steam shovel (Agnes the Digger), and Sturrock allows a late-innings romance to bloom between Miss Hedgehog and Mr. Porcupine. Sturrock also moderates Mrs. Fox's adulation for her husband: she upbraids him for wallowing in grief over his severed tail when he should be doing something to put food on the table. (Neither Sturrock nor Dahl shows sympathy for the chickens and ducks.)

Picker's spritzzy score is rooted in Stravinsky's neoclassicism while it also gallivants all over the map. A recurring clarinet theme is cousin to the Cat's theme from Prokofiev's *Peter and the Wolf*, and the busy percussion part seems at times to channel Spike Jones. Eastern Europe makes an appearance, as does the tango. It's all unified by a consistent handling of complex textures, by a penchant for ensemble singing and by an astute theatricality.

Opera in San Antonio has been intermittently distinguished, but it's nearly always flawed by compromises in production standards. With this all-new

staging of *Fantastic Mr. Fox*, Opera San Antonio has signaled its intention to brook no compromises.

There were none to speak of in the youthful cast, led by the bright, stirring baritone and dashing athletic presence of John Brancy in the title role. Mezzo-soprano Renée Rapier's warmth and sturdiness were ideally suited to Mrs. Fox. Countertenor Andrey Nemzer's vocal portrayal of Agnes the Digger bore a perfectly apt likeness to an air-raid siren. Soprano Elizabeth Futral's Miss Hedgehog was a wonderful example of vocal characterization; her lament over her spinsterhood was the comedic hit of the evening. Nearly as effective was mezzo-soprano Tynan Davis's inebriated Rita the Rat. The villainous farmers Boggis, Bunce and Bean were splendidly sung by bass-baritone Andrew Craig Brown, tenor Edwin Vega and baritone Gabriel Preisser, respectively.

As impressive as the singing was the cast's success in melding into a spirited, cohesive acting ensemble under the resourceful stage director Erica Olden, who found plenty of appropriate action for the players without resorting to camp or cliché.

British illustrator Emily Carew Woodard designed the delicious confection of storybook and toy imagery, in association with Karen L. Miller (scenery) and Tommy Bourgeois (costumes). ■

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