

# Children's Hour

By Heidi Waleson Dec. 28, 1998 12:01 am ET

Creating operas for children must present composers and librettists with a terrible temptation toward saccharine prettiness and preachy messages about self-esteem, but Tobias Picker and Donald Sturrock, the authors of **"Fantastic Mr. Fox,"** which recently had its premiere at the Los Angeles Opera, did not succumb. Instead, they stayed true to their subject matter -- a novel by Roald Dahl. Children love Dahl, whose many other books include "Charlie and the Chocolate Factory," for his macabre sense of humor, grotesque characters who always seem within the range of possibility, and sophisticated plots in which right triumphs but cleverness plays a crucial role in the besting of the stupid, the greedy and the venal.

Mr. Picker demonstrated a profound grasp of dramatic musical storytelling in "Emmeline," his first opera. Mr. Sturrock, a British film and television director, heads the Roald Dahl Foundation. Together the pair captured Dahl's spirit in a musical language that challenged, entertained and never pandered, skillfully balancing dark and light. And darkness there certainly was. A trio of farmers, Boggis, Bunce and Bean decide to annihilate a family of foxes who have been stealing their fowls. They lie in wait outside the animals' den, waiting for Mr. Fox to emerge, but only succeed in shooting off his tail. Trapped in the hillside by the farmers, Mr. Fox hatches a plan. With the aid of some other burrowing creatures, he tunnels his way out the other side, into the farmyard, which the animals joyfully pillage for a celebratory feast. Meanwhile, the farmers, abetted by two huge earthmoving machines, have dug up and destroyed the hill to no avail, and are, as Mrs. Fox puts it, "still waiting."

Mr. Sturrock enlarged Dahl's basic story, deepening some characters and creating others. Two entirely new creatures gave Mr. Picker the chance for some particularly inspired writing: Miss Hedgehog (soprano Sari Gruber),

who laments her spinsterhood in a touchingly lyrical aria, and Agnes the Digger (Jill Grove), a butch earthmover with a dramatic mezzo range who is even scarier and more powerful than the nasty farmers with their guns. Mr. Sturrock depended on his lively characters rather than plot to explore the theme of people and machines pitted against the natural world. The Dahl story devotes much more time to the tunneling operations of the foxes and their friends, while the opera, weighted toward the colorful bad guys, didn't quite capture the sense of struggle and victory among the good. Mr. Sturrock also tended to overuse text, cramming in too many words rather than letting music take over. This sometimes made Mr. Picker's settings feel rushed and cramped. A smaller theater might have helped: In the huge Dorothy Chandler Pavilion, it was often hard for listeners to distinguish all those words, a particular frustration for the nonreading youngsters who couldn't take advantage of the supertitles.

But with Mr. Picker's lyric gift and dramatic sense, the opera was a captivating and witty entertainment. Oboe themes representing the natural world contrasted with the percussive characterization of the people and the machines. Mr. Picker also made colorful orchestral use of mallet instruments and a piano. The fox family and the quintet of bad guys had catchy ensembles, there were two haunting chorales for a children's chorus of trees, and the fox pair celebrated their victory at the end with, of course, a fox trot. The only misstep was the flamboyant, klezmer-tinged aria of Rita the Rat (Josepha Gayer), which appeared late in the show, and tried too hard to appeal to the adults in the audience by comically quoting Spinoza. Baritone Gerald Finley was a sonorous Mr. Fox, mezzo Suzanna Guzman his supportive mate. Tenor Charles Castronovo, in the brief role of the Porcupine, is a singer to watch. Conductor Peter Ash was not always scrupulous about keeping the orchestra from overpowering the singers.

Designer Gerald Scarfe, who has an eye for the grotesque, created a delightful rotating set of a hill, rather like a child's paper collage, which switched easily from fox hole to farm to eviscerated land. His costumes

matched the outsize characters, particularly the hugely fat Boggis (Louis Lebherz), the attenuated long-headed Bean (Jamie Offenbach), the lavishly spiked Porcupine in muscle-displaying gear, and red Agnes, whose mechanical shovel had gleaming eyes. The foxes' pointy masks, fastened to the tops of their heads rather than their faces, did not impede their singing and gave them animal-like features while their human clothes took care of the anthropomorphic side. Mr. Sturrock's directing was almost secondary to the sets and costumes, and of the animals, only Mr. Fox suited his movements to his character.

Now for the kid report: This piece isn't for the very young or easily frightened child. A little girl behind me was terrified by the shooting of Farmer Bean's gun in the first scene, never quite recovered, and had to be removed, but my five-year-old nephew announced that he wants to be Bean next Halloween (the Bean's goosestepping walk was a common sight during intermission.) He was bored by Miss Hedgehog's plaintive aria, however, which was my nine-year-old daughter's favorite part. My six-year-old daughter particularly adored the malevolent Agnes, and is still singing the foxcubs' chant, "Boggis, Bunce and Bean. One fat, one short, one lean." They'd all see it again, and so would I.

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Once, however, was more than enough for the overpraised "**Powder Her Face,**" an opera by the young British composer Thomas Ades, presented recently at the Brooklyn Academy of Music. The attention lavished on the opera probably has much to do with its titillating subject matter -- the life of the sexually adventurous Duchess of Argyll and the aria that the principal soprano performs as she simulates fellatio. The score sounds like fractured Kurt Weill much of the time. Unlike Mr. Picker, whose musical inventiveness serves character and drama in "Fantastic Mr. Fox," Mr. Ades just seems to be showing off how cleverly he can manipulate and stir up a host of musical references, and his arias don't register. Of the four singers, only Heather

Buck, as the maid and the Duke's mistress, made a strong impression, and the extremely high pitch of her role grew tedious after a while. Robert Spano kept the small orchestra, drawn from the Brooklyn Philharmonic, capably together -- this was certainly the show in which to play the trombone. The spare, two-level production, dominated by a huge gynecomorphic bed with stuffed breasts and legs, was directed by Edward Berkeley and designed by Anne C. Patterson.