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## OPERA REVIEW

# A Puppet, Coercion and a Corpse

By



A scene from 'The Scarlet Ibis,' by Stefan Weisman and David Cote. CORY WEAVER

**HEIDI WALESON**

Jan. 13, 2015 6:10 p.m. ET

*New York*

PROTOTYPE FESTIVAL

Through Jan. 17

Now in its third year, the invigorating Prototype Festival, a collaboration of Beth Morrison Projects and HERE, has brought together this month another collection of contemporary pieces

that push at the conventional boundaries of opera and theater. So far, “The Scarlet Ibis” by Stefan Weisman and David Cote, playing at HERE through Jan. 17, is the most traditional work. It is a narrative, 100-minute chamber opera for five singers and nine players, yet its subject is subtly subversive, and its production groundbreaking.

Based on a 1960 story by James Hurst, “The Scarlet Ibis” is about two young brothers in rural North Carolina early in the 20th century. The elder, called only Brother, is dismayed and bemused by his frail sibling, whom he dubs Doodle and tries to make “normal.” Brother teaches Doodle to walk when the adults have given up on him, but he pushes too hard. The creators avoid a victimization tale, however: The relationship between the two is sensitively drawn, helped by the casting. As Brother, mezzo Hai-Ting Chinn is boyish in her exuberance and her bullying, yet she also leaves room for her character to doubt. Doodle is acted by an expressive, smaller-than-child-size puppet, created by Tom Lee and manipulated by three puppeteers, and sung by Eric S. Brenner in a plangent high countertenor. Singer, puppeteers and puppet create a single unit, making Doodle both an alien being and a little boy who wants to please his brother.

The siblings’ contrasting music—Doodle’s dreamily chromatic and Brother’s rhythmically insistent—drives the score, as does Mr. Cote’s pointed libretto, though the piece could benefit from some cutting. As is often the case in children’s stories, the three adults, whose music has a folklike lilt, are in the background: Abigail Fischer is the sensitive Mother, Nicole Mitchell’s velvety contralto is ideal for the superstitious Auntie, and Keith Phares is suitably dour as the Father, whose answer to any problem is carpentry. Under Steven Osgood, the American Modern Ensemble creates atmosphere, conjuring up the swamp that entices the boys, and a deadly storm. Director Mallory Catlett’s production is at one with the music: Joseph Silovsky’s simple set of rolling tables, Mr. Lee’s delicate shadow puppetry, Jeanette Oi-Suk Yew’s subtly colored lighting and Andreea Mincic’s period costumes evoke not only a specific time and place but also the magic and brutality of childhood.

“Toxic Psalms,” which had its final performance at St. Ann’s Warehouse on Sunday, takes the fusion of music and theater even further. In this piece, Carmina Slovenica, the Slovenian choir of 31 young women, directed by Karmina Šilec, seems to be offering a commentary on the coercion of crowds, and as such on the nature of choral music itself. The excellent singers, in black tutus, jodhpurs and evening gowns by Belinda Radulovic, swirl, march, gesture and pose in the gloomy, cavernous space while singing music

ranging from Pergolesi's "Stabat Mater" to pieces by contemporary composers from Scandinavia to Slovenia. There is no conductor; there is throat singing, hissing, shouting, and call and response, backed up on occasion by bongos, organ and bass guitar. The lighting, by Andrej Hajdinjak, is dim; pairs of black boots are lined up in the foreground. At one point, a woman peels and crushes a lemon; later, bushels of lemons are tossed onto the stage.

Ms. Šilec's narrative, extensively but not very comprehensibly outlined in the program, has to do with spiritual anguish, religious oppression, sexual assault, and the collective experience. The printed libretto, with the translated texts for the music, doesn't help in the darkness; the spoken monologues (in English) are cryptic. Yet the power of the performers overrode the muddiness of the intellectual conception. There were haunting theatrical moments, as when, in a cluster, the women sang Rachmaninoff's "Rejoice, O Virgin" while seeming to throw a light from hand to hand. The theme about the perils of uniformity was the clearest: Toward the end of the piece, the women strutted out in phalanxes, wearing identical, military-style black costumes, singing a Kyrie and then a ferocious, menacing march, "Curse upon Iron" by Veljo Tormis. In their finale, the Pergolesi, their gestures were fluidly feminine, yet mechanical, as though they had become a cadre of Stepford wives. It was a chilling transformation.

Todd Almond wrote and performs in the slight, hourlong musical "Kansas City Choir Boy," which runs through Jan. 17, but it is really a celebrity turn for the ravaged rock singer Courtney Love. He's the eponymous, clean-cut, hometown boy; she, with her gravelly alto and long, flyaway tangle of blond hair, is Athena, the girl who left him for fame and the big city and was murdered there. There's no book; the tale is told in a few insistent pop songs and ballads, each built on a handful of repeated lines—"I'm driving. I'm 16"; "The way you are and the way you are not." Mr. Almond plays keyboard and acoustic guitar; there's also a string quartet. And six bouncy female Sirens in club gear (Paul Carey did the costumes) sing backup, lure Athena away to the bright lights, and guide Mr. Almond through the underworld in search of her.

Ms. Love and Mr. Almond generate some adolescent hormonal heat together—an impressive feat, given that she is a lot further past 16 than he is. Director Kevin Newbury makes efficient use of HERE's tiny, claustrophobic downstairs theater, with notable assistance from D.M. Wood, who designed the pulsating light show, and Zac Posen, who created the glamorous black gown that Ms. Love wears for about a minute in her