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Entertainment Arts

Trauma and guilt in Madeline Lee's desert tragedy

How special that this resurrection, revival, excavation and exhumation of one the lost operas of Oz should pull so many themes together to conclude this daring venture.

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Cast of Madeline Lee: Robert Macfarlane, Nicholas Cannon, Eddie Muliaumaseali'i, Pelham Andrews. State Opera South Australia 2019. Picture: Jason Vandepier.

FOUR downed airmen play a lazy, inconclusive game of baseball, waiting for their major to rescue them.

The wreckage of their B24 plane, the *Madeline Lee*, pokes up from the desert sand. Above the singers, the roof of the State Opera Studio presents both hangar and endless horizon. We sit on the bleachers watching them play. Candice MacAllister's design lit by Nigel Levings is a field of dreams.

Nicholas Cannon turns in an impressive performance as the lieutenant but all four men present a splendid ensemble, the varying timbres of the voices blending. Robert Macfarlane's sweet high tenor gives poignancy to the role of the boy, and the strength of Pelham Andrews' bass and the warmth of Eddie Muliaumaseali, complete the sound.



Composer John Haddock in rehearsals for Madeline Lee.
Picture: Jason Vandeppeer

To one side of the space are two pianos, Michael Ierace and the composer John Haddock, and Warwick Stengards whose pinpoint conducting underpins the successful ensemble. At times, the aggressive piano writing obscures the words for people in the lower quadrant of the packed seating.

Projected titles would have been a help but, in general, every word of the poetic libretto comes across. In act two, the major arrives with a search party, with Thomas Millhouse as first officer and Joshua Rowe and Robert England as back-up. It's 20 years later. He bailed on his crew as the plane went down in flames.

Survivor guilt has brought him back. The crash is re-created in spectacular fashion focusing on the individual tragedies. Questioned by his first officer, Warwick Fyfe breaks down and delivers an astounding performance of a mad scene for baritone, going right over the top.

As the bodies are brought out from the entombing sands, the ghosts are broken apart in the most confronting part of the story.

Director Douglas McNicol sang the lieutenant in the premiere 15 years ago, and knows the work intimately. He also understands the way men work and his grasp of the psyche of the show is key to the success of the production.

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