

# LIMELIGHT

## Music, Arts & Culture

Review

### Madeline Lee (State Opera South Australia)

A standout performance by Warwick Fyfe sees Madeline Lee soar.

State Opera Studio, Netley, Adelaide

Reviewed on 5 October, 2019

by [Vincent Plush](#) on 6 October, 2019

Almost from the advent of aviation, there have been stories of disappearing aircraft. Preachers thundered about man's magnificent flying machines being plucked from the air by the hand of God, retribution for defying the laws of gravity. A cottage industry has grown up around the myths, theories and counter-theories associated with, say, those many 'disappearances' in the Bermuda Triangle. One such story is closer to home: the disappearance of Malaysian Airlines MH370 somewhere over the Indian Ocean in March 2014.



**Robert Macfarlane, Pelham Andrews, Nicholas Cannon and Eddie Muliaumaseali'i in State Opera South Australia's *Madeline Lee*. Photo © Jason Vandeppeer**

Such misadventures have long fascinated purveyors of pulp 'histories' - look around the counters of airport bookshops - film directors, creators of television mini-series and even composers of opera.

Several decades ago now, the Australian composer John Haddock was drawn towards the tale of a US Air Force B-24 Liberator bomber that disappeared over the Libyan desert in April 1943. Its nine-member crew was thought lost under the sands but traces of their fate emerged with discoveries by geological teams from November 1958.

Haddock came to the story by means of a television mini-series, the 1970 CBS film *Sole Survivor*, starring William Shatner, amongst others, in his *pre-Star Trek* days. By then, the tale had undergone a number of semi-fictional changes; one member of the crew, the captain, had bailed out over the Mediterranean only to return to lead the military investigation into the disappearance. A dark secret hovered around him: had his cowardice consigned his crew to their deaths?

The name of the aircraft had changed too. Originally, the bomber bore the moniker *Lady Be Good*, a talisman from the Gershwin musical, the first Broadway production of the brothers Gershwin that had premiered in 1924. Now, perhaps because of constraints imposed by the then notoriously tetchy Gershwin estate, the aircraft became the

*Madeline Lee*, named for an archetypal cover-girl sweetheart back home.

In the 1970s, John Haddock had studied at the Queensland Conservatorium of Music with two legendary figures, the pianist Nancy Weir and composer-theorist Alan Lane. He moved to Sydney in 1980, joining the staff of the Australian Opera as a repeteur-accompanist. There he met the director Michael Campbell and together they fashioned their one-act opera *Madeline Lee*. The score was delivered virtually in complete form to the company and workshopped over several years. It was premiered in the Winter Season of Opera Australia in the Sydney Opera House in October 2004, to considerable acclaim.

Fifteen years later, *Madeline Lee* has re-appeared, this time in Adelaide, closing the first season of *Lost Operas of Oz*, a new project of State Opera South Australia. After a two-week rehearsal period, two performances were given in the company's Studio in refashioned warehouse premises only a couple of kilometres from Adelaide Airport. Even in reduced and straightened circumstances, *Madeline Lee* is a triumphant success, vindication of SOSA Artistic Director Stuart Maunder's determination to exhume Australian operas of the recent past.

Further adjustments needed to be made for the Adelaide performances, where the all-male cast was reduced to eight singers.

Originally in one long act of almost 90 minutes, the Adelaide presentation was divided into two acts. By necessity, the orchestral parts were taken by two pianists, the composer John Haddock himself and that splendidly versatile Adelaide pianist Michael Ierace. As he has done for all three presentations of *Lost Operas* - the [Martin y...Smith](#) 'musical fantasy' *MQ;fj, JIII* in July and the Ross Edwards-Dorothy Hewitt chamber opera *Christina's World* in August - Warwick Stengards conducted from the sidelines, his clear, unfussy direction along with a palpable enthusiasm for the score at hand never waning.

Douglas McNicol is well known and much loved in Adelaide's opera world. In August 2017, I was bowled over by his SOSA production of *Gianni Schichi* in the Adelaide Town Hall, in which he also sang the title role. In the original Sydney production of *Madeline Lee* in 2004, he created the baritone role of The Lieutenant. It was an inspired stroke inviting him to direct the present production; it would be hard to imagine any other local identity with better knowledge of this opera.

Wisely, McNicol chose not to evoke wide desert vistas and clutter the stage with the carcass of an American bomber. There were no projections, LED-lighting or surtitles to electrify this production. Instead, McNicol's focus was on the characters of the cast, drawing us deeply into their personal tragedy and internal conflicts. From the very first moments, we were confronted with the irony of American airmen playing baseball in the Libyan desert whilst awaiting their rescue. But there would be no cavalry over the horizon for these doomed lads.

Some in the audience were a little confused by proceedings. Weren't all these guys actually dead? How were we to differentiate between the dead (the crewmen) and the living (the geological/investigation party)? A production cliché, perhaps, but a little more attention to makeup and costume may have helped that. But again, that confusion may have been purposeful. It is often good to be kept guessing.

In Candice MacAllister's design, the drama was played out on a flat bed of sand with terraced wooden platforms servicing as the carcass of the aircraft. It did seem very bare, rather vacant, further directing focus on the individual singers.

Individually and as a crew, those eight male singers were magnificent. The stand-out performance came from Warwick Fyfe, re-visiting the baritone role of The Major created by Michael Lewis in 2004. Fyfe mesmerised the audience with his big, blustering voice and stage presence. There were few moments of repose here, particularly in his two gripping arias. In the first act, he commanded - literally! - the stage for nigh on 20 minutes. His second act aria, even more demented and compelling this time, was as powerful as anything I have seen on stage in Australia, recalling memories of Teddy Tahu Rhodes in Neil Armfield's 2008 production of *Billy Budd*.

The other seven members of the cast seemed charged by the electricity emanating from Fyfe. None more so than the youngest member of the cast, Robert Macfarlane, whose clear, high-pitched tenor and increasingly urgent portrayal of The Boy was haunting. With barely a week to prepare the role, bass-baritone Eddie Muliaumaseal'i bestowed the few (and very welcome) moments of reflection and repose in his portrayal of Pat, the radio operator. Ironically, some of the most memorable moments were those in which there was least energy, in the reflections of the doomed airmen singing in four-part chorales.

This was further evidence of the musical lineage of the piece. Clearly, the strongest influence was the music of Benjamin Britten, with which John Haddock would have been very familiar: the all-male cast, echoing not just *Billy Budd* but also the three *Church Parables*, the dramatic interactions of duos and quartets, the chorales, and so on. But Haddock's score also revealed other influences; at times, I was thinking I might have been listening to Berg or even Ives. Despite all such fanciful meanderings, Haddock's music was consistently and uniformly compelling, not especially original, but none the less for that. It augurs well for his next opera, *The Track*, already being workshopped by Opera Australia for the 2022 season.

In the minor-quibbles department: a pity the printed program contained such pithy information about the composer, and none about his co-librettist, Michael Campbell who actually directed the Sydney premiere production. Similarly, other flaws (not "floors") should have been arrested before printing.

By necessity of budget, Haddock's beautiful orchestration (check the short clips on SOSA's website) had to be surrendered to two pianos. At times, particularly in the first act, their clatter almost overwhelmed the singers. The keyboards were so busy they could have been playing all the Rachmaninov concertos at once! Let's hope future excursions into *Lost Operas of Oz* can create some way of bringing a full orchestra to the enterprise. The Adelaide Symphony Orchestra? The Australian Youth Orchestra? Adelaide Youth Orchestra?

And the [2020 season](#) has announced the next three Oz operas. As SOSA returns to a newly re-minted Her Majesty's Theatre, Richard Mills will conduct his own opera *The Summer of the Seventeenth Doll* in November. Jimmy Chi's 1990 musical *Bran Nue Dae* will be directed by Andrew Ross in August. April sees a return of Andrew Bovell's play *When the Rain Stops Falling*, premiered at the 2008 Adelaide Festival with expanded music by the Adelaide composer Quentin Grant.

There is general consensus in this rain-deprived capital that Stuart Maunder's brave venture into the *Lost Operas of Oz* has been a critical and artistic success. Though there is still some way to go educating and coaxing audiences away from their natural antipathy to new and Australian works, SOSA is being rewarded by ever larger and more discerning audiences. Maunder's vision stands as a glowing example for regional companies elsewhere.

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