



CLASSIC ARTS NEWS

Photo Journal: The R-Rated Opera - *Batavia* at Sydney Opera House

BY MATTHEW WESTPHAL
AUGUST 28, 2006

Have Sydney's opera fans been looking forward to this piece with excitement or trepidation or both? On the one hand, it won three Helpmann Awards (Australia's nationwide equivalent of the Oliviers) when it premiered in 2001, and *The Australian* called it "a breathtaking musical and dramatic presentation of epic scale." When it was revived for the 2004 Perth International Festival of the Arts, the critic for *andante.com* suggested that it might fairly be a candidate for the first Great Australian Opera. On the other hand, Opera Australia actually sent out warnings about onstage rape and murder and offered exchanges to its subscribers who wanted out.

The opera in question is *Batavia*, with music by Richard Mills and libretto by Peter Goldsworthy, which retells the true story of a Dutch East India Company ship bound for Java which was shipwrecked off the west Australian coast in 1629; while some of the survivors set off in search of food, water and rescue, there was wholesale rape and mass murder among those left behind in what has been called history's bloodiest mutiny. *Batavia* was commissioned by Opera Australia and the Melbourne Festival for the 2001 celebration of the country's centennial as a federation and was revived for the Perth Festival three years later; the current run, which began Saturday (August 19), is the work's Sydney premiere.

Incidentally, an Opera Australia spokesperson told *The Sydney Morning Herald* last week that few subscribers accepted the company's offer to exchange tickets; most, in fact, seem to be excited at the chance to see the opera after its successes in Melbourne and Perth.

In the event, one viewer did not welcome *Batavia*: the *Herald's* chief critic: Peter McCallum, described the opera as "the vilest thing I have experienced in the theatre ... one felt raped by the volume, alienated by the

lack of sensitivity or aptness in the musical symbols, and repelled by the unctuous sermonising."

Such a harsh appraisal from Sydney's most prominent reviewer of a work received so warmly elsewhere in the country caused a lot of discussion in Australian opera circles. The editors of *The Australian* were even moved to publish a commentary on McCallum's broadside – headlined "*Batavia* weathers one final atrocity."

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In *The Australian's* essay, Matthew Westwood does acknowledge some of McCallum's complaints, particularly regarding the music's sheer volume: "One of [composer Mills's] methods is to build up layers of voices, with complex harmony and texture, and the intensity of ensemble and orchestra at times can be quite overwhelming." Nevertheless, Westwood argues, "For all its novelty, *Batavia* is at root a conventional work of music-drama, of the type Verdi or Wagner might recognize," one which "provides the singers with terrific roles. [...] McCallum ... seems almost determined to put people off. But *Batavia* deserves to be seen ... It is powerful theatre, imaginatively staged and musically stimulating. Nobody should demand that it also be perfect."

Richard Mills's *Batavia* receives one more performances at the Sydney Opera House: August 31 at 7:30 pm. More information on this and other Opera Australia productions is available at www.opera-australia.org.au.

All photos by Branco Gaica.