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Cabaret Opera Stages an 'Opera Apocalypse'

By Ken Bullock Special to the Planet
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“Opera Apocalypse!” The title of San Francisco Cabaret Opera’s show of three short, new pieces conjures up Wagnerian images of The End. Some might say it’s a tautology. But the trio of operas—Mark Alburger’s *Antigone*, *Ophelia Forever* by Amy Beth Kirsten and John G. Bilotta’s *Quantum Mechanic*—offer a mix of humor, intensity and thoughtfulness “exploring a post-apocalyptic future focused on women.”

Some of that future is abstracted from a famous past. *Ophelia Forever* features a trio (sopranos C. A. Jordan and Megan Cullen and mezzo Cary Ann Rosco) essaying, in both solo and ensemble, the three aspects of *Ophelia*’s character: *Mad Mermaid*, *Faithfull*, *Seductress* and *Violated Saint*, with a voiceless *Melancholy Prince* (Terence Bennan) wandering through, enjoying the attention but seemingly oblivious to the derogation, in a libretto derived from *The Bard*, *Baudelaire*, *Rimbaud*, *Christina Rossetti*—and the composer.

At the start, Keisuke Nakagoshi burns up the keyboard, while Mark Alburger, Cabaret Opera musical director, conducts with one hand, fingering his oboe with the other, the music both torrential and haunting.

Bilotta’s *Quantum Mechanic*, winner of last year’s *Opera-in-a-Month* competition, receives its first full staging here, opening with a strange tableau: three turquoise-coiffed beauties in basic black with pale blue scarves posed above an old industrial refrigerator plastered with nuclear-plant-type warning signs. *Mrs. Schrodinger* (Elizabeth Henry), housewife and professor’s spouse, tears into the scene with the happy aplomb of a ’50s commercial, almost dancing as she whisks up a special fluffy dessert.

But it falls flat in the futuristic fridge, and she calls a bumbling *Quantum Mechanic* (Michael Desnoyers), who mistakenly opens up a wormhole, letting in the *Quark Sisters* (the now-animated Erin Lahm, Maria Mikheyenko and Laryssa Sadoway as *Misses Up-Down*, *Charm-Strange* and *Top-Bottom*) from the parallel universe next door, along with *Aesop the fabulist* (who delivered a genial prologue), Mark Alburger again, now in robe and ubiquitous pale blue scarf, with a dollop of white cotton on his chin, an archaic *Diz beard*. Pulling a wire (and what’s a wire doing in hi-tech? Or is it the eponymous *String Theory* that’s pulled?), the *Mechanic* vanishes, the tuneful trio retreat to their dimension with *fabulist in tow*—and the *soufflé* emerges, perfectly stiff.

Alburger’s *Antigone* is the most serious and truly apocalyptic piece of all, less *Sophocles* than the also-credited (for inspiration) *Jean Anouilh*, lacking the blind, androgynous seer *Tiresias* (unless he’s subsumed by *The Fixer*, played by set designer Adam Broner) and almost devoid of the white spaces of classical irony (something *Satie* strove for in *Socrate*), but filled with wonderful harmonies and much emotion, with a kind of humor in some exchanges and *The Puppetmaster* (Bennan again) lurking behind a swing-like throne.

Creon (an impressive bass-baritone, Micah Epps) and *Antigone* (emotionally charged soprano Eliza O’Malley, who alternates with *Letitia Page*) spar furiously, their high and low registers (and those of tenor *Desnoyers* as *Antigone*’s intended, *Haemon*, *Creon*’s son) exploited in the solos. But the solos come out of and return to the wonderful choral sound of the 13-strong ensemble—the one thing, Alburger quipped, truly Greek about it all—though he quotes Greek chant along with everything from *Bach* to the *Beach Boys* in this “grid opera” drawn from *The Magic Flute*, which will stand up with *Honegger*’s music for *Cocteau*’s *Antigone* and *Carl Orff*’s wild, percussive setting with soloists for *Holderlin*’s hyperliteral translation.

Alburger and *Harriet March Page*, artistic director, continue to realize a performance style in the grand old West Coast tradition: eclectic, professional—and fun.

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