

BWW Opera Review: PARK AND BARK - The Next Generation, from NYU and AOP



May 11, 2016 by Richard Sasanow



Rehearsal for PARK AND BARK at NYU black box theatre.

"Park and bark" is a term usually used derogatively when speaking about opera--a kind of old-style singing that involves standing still and bursting forth in song, with little or no acting skills involved. There certainly wasn't anything old-fashioned about the operas or the group of young singers who performed them at NYU Tisch School's black box theatre on May 7 (except perhaps their good training) in "Park and Bark--6 Mini-Operas about Brooklyn's Fort Greene Park," in the first part of a two-day event that finished the next day on-site in the park with six more short works.

The performance was the outcome of an advanced class for composers and librettists at NYU in opera writing, led by composer Randall Eng, and under the mentorship of American Opera Projects (AOP), headed by Charles Jarden

(also chairman of the Fort Green Park Conservancy). The assignment: create operas inspired in some way by the park, which dates back to the Revolutionary War. It seemed like the writers had fun--and so did the audience.

In order of appearance, the six pieces were:

"Margaret," music by Paolo K. Tirol, libretto by Shoshana Greenberg

"The Bone Keepers," music by Casey O'Neil, libretto by Sophia Chapadjiev

"I Celebrate," music by TJ Rubin, libretto by Marella Martin-Koch (inspired by and featuring Walt Whitman poetry)

"Uprising," music by Aleksandra Weil, libretto by Laura Barati

"The Unknown Life," music by Yoonmi Lee, libretto by Orian Israelsohn

"Hummingbirds," music by Edison Hong, libretto by Manda Leigh Blunt

The operas, all of which are related to the park in some way, each ran under 15 minutes, with subjects including lots of ghosts, "beta males," a revenge fantasy about musicians, and otherworldly bone keepers who reconstruct the bones of corpses in the park's crypt. (While all the composer-librettist teams did well, "The Bone Keepers"--a kind of creep show meets Laverne & Shirley--was a favorite of mine, particularly the duet for mezzo Sarah Heitzel and soprano Amelia Watkins.) They were fluidly staged by Sam Helfrich, professor and head of dramaturgy at NYU, as well as active stage and opera director.

The productions were helped enormously by the thoughtful work of the four singers involved, bass Sam Carl and tenor Blake Friedman, along with mezzo Heitzel and soprano Watkins, who all showed great flair in roles that called on their ardent singing as well as comedic as well as dramatic abilities. Mila Henry provided sympathetic music direction from the piano. Lighting was by NYU/Tisch's Graduate Department of Design for Stage & Film (Jennifer Reiser, Derek Van Heel and Peter W. Mitchell).

For 25 years, AOP has been identifying, developing and presenting innovative works of opera and music theater by established and emerging American artists. Only time will tell how these young writing teams from NYU will fare--but, in any case, it was good to be there at the beginning.

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