

Opera stumbles in its wanderings

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JOHN TERAUDS
CLASSICAL MUSIC CRITIC

Pelléas et Mélisande

★★(out of 4)

By Claude Debussy. Canadian Opera Company. Directed by Nicholas Muni. Jan Latham-Koenig, conductor. To May 24. Four Seasons Centre for the Performing Arts, 145 Queen St. W.

416-363-8231

A great night at the opera means seeing a stage full of characters who feel trapped by their fates and emotions, yet still leaving the theatre feeling exalted.

It's not so good when you feel your own life force ebbing away well before the title character has had a chance to slip into death.

Unfortunately, the Canadian Opera Company's mainstage season-closer – Claude Debussy's early 20th-century masterpiece, *Pelléas et Mélisande* – feels twice as long as its 3-plus-hour running time. This despite a captivating stage design (by Dany Lyne) and a stunning performance by Canadian baritone Russell Braun in the role of Pelléas.

Adopting a style pioneered in modern times by Richard Wagner that became the standard for contemporary opera, Debussy's only such work is a seamless flow of music from beginning to end.

The orchestral score underpins dialogue sung in melodic fragments that put the emphasis on the text, adapted from a play by Maurice Maeterlinck.

The score is like a big orchestral tone poem, which has been nicely shaped by conductor Jan Latham-Koenig. The first notes, as the lights go up on Lyne's stylized, dark forest, have to give us that once-upon-a-time sense of wonder.

The COC Orchestra's strings deliver beautifully, but there were times throughout last night's premiere that a little bit more musical swoop and waft wouldn't have been out of place.

It's tempting to sing the score like a French *mélodie*, where the voice can recline on the legato languors of seemingly endless phrases. But this kind of visceral

detachment drains the opera stage of the necessary energy to carry everyone through the evening.

Only Braun filled his character (who falls in love with the mysterious princess Mélisande who his brother found in the woods) with real flesh and blood – all the while giving us a series of unblemished French musical arcs.

Soprano Isabel Bayrakdarian, whose character wanders lost, distant and unhappy through the story, sounded equally disconnected from her role as Mélisande.

Even her voice lacked its customary zing and ring.

Bass-baritone Pavlo Hunka is back in great form, but his lumpy phrasing and heavy delivery – in perfect character as Pelléas's jealous older brother, Golaud – didn't help move things along, either.

The opera is more about mood than plot, but director Nicholas Muni might have tried something a bit more dynamic than having Bayrakdarian and Braun inertly lying around much of the time.

The more minor characters were all well sung. Lyne's creative, post-Apocalyptic set, reprised from the COC's production in 2000, **was expertly lit by Thomas C. Hase**. The only botch amid Lyne's mixed bag of costumes is Mélisande's red wig: more mop than long, titian tresses from a pre-Raphaelite painting. It's an unfortunate metaphor for much of this production.