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Rufus Wainwright's valiant 'Prima Donna' takes a bow in Toronto

I've only caught three of the more than 150 events packed into 40 venues and 10 days that make up this year's **Luminato Festival** in Toronto, so I'd never dare to make any rash generalizations about this really cool enterprise. But if I were so inclined, I'd say a theme of the 2010 fest seems to be: Sometimes the best part of a work turns out to be the performance of it.

There was "**Dark Star Requiem**," which didn't quite have enough memorable material inside it, but was presented with terrific skill and sensitivity. There was "**The Infernal Comedy**," which was as distasteful and annoying as it was brilliantly rendered.



And now there's "Prima Donna," the much discussed and dismissed first opera by Canadian-American pop star Rufus Wainwright, which received its North American premiere Monday night in Toronto's historic, opera house-like Elgin Theatre. It's one of the big attractions of the Luminato lineup (the festival was one of the original co-commissioners of the work), but there's not much to write home about, except the quality of the production – a vibrant cast, especially soprano Janis Kelly, who gives a finely acted, warmly sung interpretation of the title role; the pretty scenic design by Antony McDonald; **the highly atmospheric lighting by Thomas Hase**; the smooth conducting by Robert Houssart; the fine playing of the orchestra; the deft directing by Tim Albery.

After that, things get a little more problematic.

To begin with, there's the awful, frequently insipid libretto by Wainwright and Bernadette Colomine (in French, by the way – that language choice is ostensibly the reason why the Metropolitan Opera decided to opt out as original commissioner of the piece). We're talking Cliché City here. "Prima Donna" has got plenty of company when it comes to operas with weak plots, of course. It's just that great composers have a way of transcending them. Wainwright actually seems to believe in this trite tale that, dramatically speaking, is anything but convincing.

In brief, here's the set-up: Regine Saint Laurent, a near-legendary soprano, gave up singing and, it seems, retired from life in 1964, secluding herself in a Paris apartment. Six years later, on Bastille Day, she's ready to announce her return to the stage to perform the opera that had been her triumphant swan song, a work based on the life of Eleanor of Aquitaine. "Like a bird with a broken wing, I need to fly again," she sings. But deep down, Regine isn't really so sure of herself or her voice. It's major angst time. When Andre, a journalist-tenor (what a combination), arrives to interview her, the soprano's emotional state gets quite a jolt.

The story evokes, to some extent, the last years of Maria Callas, right down to the Paris apartment, without being nearly as compelling. What's worse is the hint of "Sunset Boulevard," complete with a doting, fussy butler who is determined that Madame should sing again and throws a fit when she changes her mind. In the last scene, things turn downright silly.

Regine has fallen for Andre after their brief meeting and, it appears, he has fallen for her. But when he comes back that night, Regine sees someone else out in the hall (her inquiry "Who is that woman" is, of course, right out of "Madama Butterfly"). Somehow, Andre forgot that he had a date with his fiancée that night, so he has only stopped by with her to explain that to Regine and, oh yeah, ask for an autograph. Regine is left alone as the holiday fireworks light up the sky and strains of the French national anthem rise from the orchestra.

In the immortal words of a venerable Canadian, Anna Russell, I'm not making this up, you know.

As for Wainwright's music, I couldn't possibly stomp all over the music, as some of my critical brethren across the Pond did after the world premiere last year (I'm told the opera has been revised since then). There really is a lot of decent, thoughtful, attractive material in the score, including tenderly soaring melodic lines and effective instrumental coloring (Bryan Senti is credited as orchestration assistant).

Wainwright has proven that he's comfortable departing from his regular musical turf. He just hasn't yet proven that he has a distinctive stylistic voice for opera. He uses a whole bunch of voices, instead – touches of Massenet and Puccini (think "La Rondine"), a dash of John Adams, a hint of Andrew Lloyd Webber, and quite a bit more. (One application of Puccini isn't derivative, by the way, but an actual quote – a couple notes from "Boheme," cutely and subtly used during the first Regine-Andre exchange.)

Given how tonal, lyrical and just plain old-fashioned Wainwright's music is (and I think there's still room for tonality and lyricism today), "Prima Donna" might be better off if the libretto were refashioned to take place in a much more distant past than 1970, some time back when all the romanticism being reworked here would fit the story line.

In the end, it's a valiant effort, to be sure, and Wainwright should try another. After all, it's not easy to create an operatic masterwork the first time out.

It was fun to see the big crowd that turned out to cheer Rufus on. The encouragement started even before the curtain call. As Wainwright and his significant other walked hand-in-hand toward the theater from across the street, with a whole retinue of friends and relatives in tow (including a strikingly tall drag queen), a guy sitting near the intersection called out "Break a leg." And a crowd at the lobby entrance greeted Wainwright with applause as he walked in, like at a movie premiere.

You don't see that sort of thing every day on your way to an opera. The large number of young people attending the performance was a rare sight, too. So, in terms of attracting interest, "Prima Donna" is certainly a star.