



February 2, 2009

## Mermaid tale sings a siren song

By JOHN COULBOURN -- Sun Media

TORONTO - In the final analysis, it seems, composer Antonin Dvorak provided a lot more music than librettist Jaroslav Kvapil provided story when the two sat down to adapt Friedrich Heinrich Lark de la Motte Fouque's Undine to the operatic stage in a work titled Rusalka.

Happily, that doesn't prove to be an insurmountable impediment to the Canadian Opera Company's premiere production of the century-old work -- a premiere programmed by the late Richard Bradshaw to mark the 100th birthday of COC co-founder Nicholas Goldschmidt, who passed away almost precisely five years ago.

The COC's Rusalka, on loan from Theater Erfurt, opened on the stage of the Four Seasons Saturday.



Rooted in German mythology, this is a not unfamiliar story of a mermaid, the fair Rusalka of title, sung by soprano Julie Makerov, who falls madly in love with a mortal prince (tenor Michael Schade) who comes regularly to bath in the lake Rusalka calls home.

Driven to near distraction by her love for the prince, Rusalka finally decides to acquire a human form, but in order to accomplish that goal she must not only forsake her father, the Water Gnome, (sung by baritone Richard Paul Fink), but according to the deal she strikes with the apparently upwardly mobile witch Jezibaba (mezzo soprano Irina Mishura), she must give up her voice as well.

The deal struck and the transformation accomplished, she and her prince meet and fall madly in love -- but entranced though he may be by his lovely water spirit, the prince soon tires of her cool silence and allows himself to be seduced by the wiles of a foreign princess (soprano Joni Henson), who is determined to make the prince her own.

The prince's betrayal drives the heart-broken Rusalka back to the water world to which she no longer belongs, and when the prince follows her there, tragedy on a truly operatic scale ensues.

In staging the work, director Dmitri Bertman, set designer Hartmut Schorghofer and lighting designer Thomas C. Hase conspire to ensure at every turn that, despite the bare-bones structure of the tale, this never turns into a mere recital of Dvorak's glorious music, beautifully rendered here by the COC Orchestra, under conductor John Keenan.

Sung in Czech, with English Surtitles, their Rusalka is a constantly transforming dream world, flitting, not always gracefully, from woodland to watery wonderland and from storybook to high (and delightfully low) drama, in a staging that is often as much about distracting the audience as it is about directing the focus of the tale.

Along the way, there are any number of fine performances, headlined by the swaggering Schade and the fearless Makerov, -- both of whom are becoming clear favourites with a COC audience -- and moving down the line to the fine work like that of sopranos Lisa DiMaria and Erin Fisher and mezzo Teiya Kasahara stepping in as a trio of high flying wood nymphs, of baritone Nicolae Raiciu as the prince's hunting companion and of soprano Betty Allison and tenor Michael Barrett, who team up to do some impressive outside-the-envelope performing as the turnspit and the gamekeeper respectively.

All of which conspires, in the end, to make costume designer Corinna Crome's fashion crimes against this production all the more tragic. Bad enough that very few of her costumes serve the story, but that so few of them succeed in serving the performers either makes her contribution to what could otherwise be a delightful evening of theatre all the more bewildering.