

Dallas Opera's Season Comes to a Triumphant End with Story of Love Triangle Set in 50 B.C.

BY MONICA SMART

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Norma (Elza van den Heever) and Pollione (Yonghoon Lee, making his Dallas debut) ascend to the funeral pyre.

Karen Almond, Dallas Opera

The Dallas Opera is ending its 60th season on a high note with a masterful production of the bel canto opera *Norma*. The company's first ever presentation of Vincenzo Bellini's 1831 masterpiece fills out what company director Keith Cerny has called "a noticeable gap in the company's repertoire." This grand drama set during the Roman occupation of Gaul in 50 B.C. featured a massive re-creation of a Druid temple, a large chorus and dazzling voices.

The title role is a challenging one and South African-born soprano Elza van den Heever delivered the fireworks expected. Van den Heever barely took a breath while executing the embellishments, trills and rapid-fire runs that make *Norma* the epitome of the bel canto genre. Her vocal range was best showcased on *Norma*'s signature aria "Casta diva." When performing the sad melody "Teneri figli" (Tender Children), during which Norma contemplates murdering her children, Van den Heever adeptly conveyed Norma's bipolar nature.



Sopranos Elza van den Heever (Norma) and Marina Costa-Jackson (Adalgisa) made a powerful team.

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Soprano Marina Costa-Jackson portrayed the vulnerable Adalgisa, a novice Druid priestess who is the third corner of the unhappy love triangle around which the drama revolves. The lightness and delicacy of Jackson's singing, with its floating and spinning high note, was a perfect balance to van den Heever. Each made the other's performance shine and their stunning duet was a high point of the evening.

The eloquent tenor Yonghoon Lee made his Dallas debut as Pollione, the father of Norma's children. Lee's charming presence and rich voice made for beautiful melodic duets with Van den Heever and Jackson, and the overlapping texture of all three voices sounded especially lovely.

Providing a powerful bass and authoritative presence, Christian Van Horn sang the role of Norma's father Oroveso. Ably rounding out the cast was Charles Karanja as the friend of Pollione and Mithra Mastropiero as Clotide, Norma's confidante.

John Conklin designed the priestesses' robes and scarves, the Druid chorus' rags and the massive set featuring a Druid temple with a background of mountains. **Projections of masks, orbs of bright red and faces of pagan gods were designed by Thomas C. Hase, whose skilled lighting reinforced the action onstage by changing from yellow to blood red or black but left the audience to imagine the gory details after Norma and Pollione ascend to the pyre.** The chorus was well prepared by chorus master Alexander Rom and sang beautifully as the mass of confused Druids prepared for war.

Conductor Emmanuel Villaume was visibly excited throughout the production, a whirling dervish in the pit, managing the Dallas Opera orchestra with equal amounts of energy and restraint. The music highlighted the splendid voices that made the Dallas premiere of this bel canto masterpiece a triumph.

Norma; 7:30 p.m. Wednesday, April 26, Saturday, April 29, and 2 p.m. Sunday, May 7; Winspear Opera House; 2403 Flora St.; \$25-\$229; dallasopera.org.