



Opera has Grecian formula

By **JOHN COULBOURN**, TORONTO SUN

Close your eyes and picture Edvard Munch's iconic painting , The Scream.

Now, imagine it set to music.

Congratulations! You have just created a mental video clip of the Canadian Opera Company's current production of Elektra.

But for the complete picture, you're going to have to pay a visit to the Four Seasons Centre, where the opera is running through May 19, on the heels of its Saturday opening.

Premiered in 1909, Elektra is the work of composer Richard Strauss -- an opera in one act, featuring Strauss's powerful music soaring over a libretto created by Hugo von Hofmannsthal, after the work of Sophocles. This being Sophocles, of course, there is a Grecian formula to the tale of a daughter driven insane by the murder of her beloved father -- and by her mother's complicity in the murder.

But while Grecian scholars are certain to recognize the story of the loyal daughter desperate to revenge her murdered father, Agamemnon, those with a taste for contemporary emotional thrillers are likely to find Strauss's work striking a few familiar chords as well.

In bringing the story to the stage, director Thomas de Mallet Burgess and designers Dererk McLane (sets), Anita Stewart (costumes) and Thomas C. Hase (lighting) have conspired to create a living, pulsing reflection of the opera's musical and emotional landscape on stage -- a landscape that has little to do with Greece, but one that echoes with timeless tragedy nonetheless.

Drenched in vivid, almost lurid light, it is a fractured, brutal world that fairly explodes with angst, peopled by visions seemingly cut from the whole cloth of a tortured fevered brain -- a world where sorrow and the need for vengeance colour everything in powerful primary hues.

It is the world of Elektra, magnificently sung by soprano Susan Bullock, securing the niche she'd already carved in the hearts of a Toronto audience in her magnificent performance as Brunhilde in last fall's Ring cycle.

As the demented, sorrowing Elektra, she doesn't so much perform her role as attack it with the courage of utter conviction, milking every last ounce of pain and passion from the disturbed character and pouring it into her powerful soaring voice.

In this, she is matched at every turn by another Toronto favourite, contralto Ewa Podles, returning to the COC stage in triumph to essay the role of Klytamnestra, Elektra's tortured mother, who now shares her bed with her husband's murderer.

To round things out, soprano Alwyn Mellor claims her own piece of the stage as Elektra's sister Chrysothemis and holds her own in the face of these two powerful performances to complete a performance triangle that is virtually unassailable.

It is a tale in which, obviously, women figure prominently, and sadly, by the time the men appear, it seems almost too late for them to make much of an impression.

As Orest, Elektra's avenging brother, baritone Daniel Sutin more than meets the vocal demands of the role, but remains throughout a largely static force, almost completely overshadowed, apparently by directorial fiat, by the power of Bullock's performance. Meanwhile, as the murderous Aegisth, tenor John Mac Master seems to be completely out of his league.

Fortunately, Richard Bradshaw is on hand to keep the women from completely walking away with the show, keeping a tight rein on the COC Orchestra and milking the last ounce of madness from Strauss's dark, disturbing and ultimately thrilling score.

In concert with director, designers and an impressive supporting cast, Bradshaw has packed so much madness into this production of Elektra that it might just be madness to miss it.

ELEKTRA

The Four Seasons

Conductor: Richard Bradshaw

Director: Thomas De Mallet Burgess

Sun Rating: 4 1/2 out of 5