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Flash Reviews

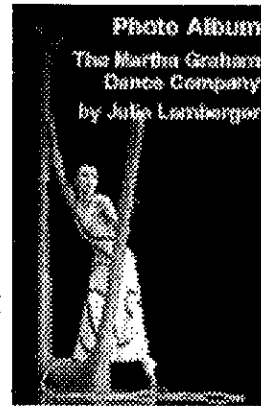
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Out of the Fog, 10-12: Comes a King
Morris Meets Arthur; 'Peony' for Young Lovers

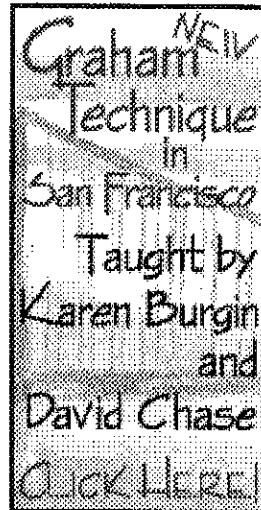
By [Aimee Ts'ao](#)

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SAN FRANCISCO -- After my first column last week I was wondering how I was going to come flying out of the fog this time. The Blue Angels were here this past weekend for the US Navy's annual Fleet Week celebration. It's terrifying to have these fighter jets practice right over your head, flying low at hundreds of mph and shattering your eardrums. Not to mention that the Bay Area is home to many refugees from all over the world who, when they hear the planes "strafing" the city, wonder if they have really escaped warfare after all. But even more irritating is seeing our tax dollars at work providing "entertainment" for the patriotic masses. I would rather the Defense budget were divided up to cover education, healthcare and the arts. Since our government isn't likely to start subsidizing dance the way European countries do, at least here in the Bay Area we do have one arts organization which has been responsible for presenting and producing an enormous number of dance events, in addition to music and theater. Now in its 101st season, Cal Performances not only continues to bring a wide variety of arts performances to the University of California Berkeley campus, but it also commissions new work. Without this last function, I wouldn't be writing about Mark Morris's latest endeavor as an opera director, "King Arthur," which received its U.S. premiere at Zellerbach Hall on September 29, performed by the Philharmonia Baroque Orchestra, the seven soloists from the English National Opera's production which premiered in June in London, the Mark Morris



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Dance Group and the UC Berkeley Chamber Chorus. Indeed, between work created for Cal Performances and across the Bay on San Francisco Ballet, Morris has had so many commissions here that the Bay Area has become a kind of second home for the New York-based choreographer.



When I interviewed Morris by phone on Saturday, September 29, I pointed out that he seemed to work with vocal music much more than most choreographers -- by my rough count, in close to a third of his work. When I asked if he chose which operas to direct or if he was asked to direct specific works, Morris said it was both, except that he turned down offers if he didn't like the music. "King Arthur" was his idea, he said, and he had worked on this Purcell opera for ten years before getting it to the stage. "When I first was going to do it," he explained, "it turned out to be one of those Purcell years when everyone was doing a production of it all over the world. You know that opera is extremely expensive, and takes several years of planning, so I switched and did [Rameau's] 'Platee.' 'King Arthur' has always been in the back of my mind. I was going to do it and then it was postponed. I was about to give up on it because it had been so many years of frustration in trying to put it on. It finally happened and I started over. I threw all of my ideas away and started from scratch. If it didn't work this time, if for some reason it got cancelled or postponed, that was it. I was going to give up on it." Fortunately Morris persevered long enough for Cal Performances, the English National Opera, Philharmonia Baroque Orchestra and the New York City Opera -- which has scheduled the work for the spring of 2008 -- to step in and co-commission him to direct this Purcell Dramatic opera or 'semi-opera,' to use the terms employed to describe operas that contain dialogue between vocal musical sections as in operetta or musical comedy.

When I asked Morris when in the creative phase he had decided to cut Dryden's dialogue, he recounted, "It is somewhat different than it would have been if I had done it five or ten years ago. My point of view changed. I was going to [delete the dialogue] and worked on it a lot. Then I was going to abridge it very, very severely and put very small amounts of speaking in it. Then I thought I'd do it through film. I thought of a bunch of things. I was going to have a cast of actors and then decided against it and [to] not subject us to that. Then suddenly everyone was an expert on Dryden. When I did it in London, it was like -- 'How dare he cut the text,' as opposed to 'It's cut, why is that?' But I'd been reading [the dialogue] for ten years before I decided not to use it."

On Saturday, September 16, at the last minute I decided to see Part 2 of "The Peony Pavilion," a classical Chinese opera written by Tang Xianzu and performed by the Suzhou Kun Opera Theater of Jiangsu, China. (Where else but Zellerbach Hall, Berkeley, presented by Cal Performances?) I was hoping to find some common threads that I could weave into my upcoming review of "King Arthur." Without going into great detail, I will say that this opera was first performed at the very end of the 16th century, more than 400 years ago. Kun scholar Kenneth Hsien-yung Pai reworked this version, called the Young Lovers' Edition, condensing the original down from 55 scenes in 20 hours to 27 scenes in 9 hours, and divided it into a trio of three-hour parts, performed over three days. (Unfortunately, I missed both the first and third parts.) It also used relatively young singers in the principal roles to give it a more realistic feeling. (Somewhat akin to Zefferelli's use of young actors in his film of "Romeo and Juliet.")

I was utterly transfixed. I know that for Americans, Chinese opera is often an acquired taste. Perhaps because my Chinese father had been born and raised in Shanghai, my genetic memory kicked in and I didn't need any time to acclimate myself to this set of performance values. Kun opera, renowned for its stylistic refinement, poetic nuance and broad emotional range, strives to seamlessly combine music, song, dance, recitation, and movement (including acrobatics) and here the company completely succeeded. I was most impressed by the lead singers, who sang while simultaneously employing exquisite hand gestures or doing intricate choreography. I certainly had never seen a Western opera singer even come close and prayed for the day that one might even take a significant step in that direction.

After seeing "King Arthur" I suppose the honest thing would be to eat my words. Here were Western opera singers doing more than the squawk and walk approach to performing. While not as refined as the Chinese, these performers, who sang in the ENO production as well as the one here, particularly the men, did some pretty complicated gesturing as choreographed by Morris. But I'm getting ahead of myself. Let's take it from the top.

I confess that I had to go see "King Arthur" twice before writing this review. Partly because there is too much to absorb in one sitting and partly because I became so engrossed and enjoyed it so much that I barely took any notes after the first couple of scenes. Once I had gotten the broader picture, didn't need to read the supertitles to understand the lyrics (they were in English, but this is opera, after all) and knew when to pay closer attention to the details that interested me, I was able to

formulate my analysis much more precisely the second time around. Besides, one can never get too much of a good thing.

The director's note in the program reads:

"King Arthur is here presented as a pageant -- a sort of vaudeville -- a sequence of production numbers sacred and profane, small and large, sad and happy, sung and danced.

"I chose to discard the spoken text (which I don't like) and keep all of the music (which I do).

"The setting is the stage. The time is now. The performers are themselves."

What "King Arthur" does manage to do despite this disclaimer of sorts is hint at British history, suggest times of long ago, poke fun at a lot of things and evoke feelings that some universal truths about love, loyalty, sex, and life have been addressed. Even Western opera often aspires to present a balance of music, theater, visual arts and dance or movement in a unified whole, or as Wagner put it "Gesamtkunstwerk" (total artwork). By placing the chorus (The UC Berkeley Chamber Chorus) in the pit with the Philharmonia Baroque Orchestra, conducted by Jane Glover, Morris was able to use the dancers of his company as a moving Greek chorus on stage. Purcell's gorgeous music, especially when played on period instruments, combined with wonderfully subtle and not-so-subtle referential costumes by Isaac Mizrahi, Adrienne Lobel's inventive and witty scenic design and lighting design by James F. Ingall, makes for an entire evening that is entertaining and uplifting.

I will mention just the highlights and encourage you to try to see this opera, either in New York or whenever else it gets produced. (The Cal Performances run is now over.)

Morris's choreography is, as everyone -- from critics to audience members -- likes to remark, very musical, often in the most obvious ways, with big movements falling on strong accents in the music, or fluttery ones on the trills. But if you look very closely you will also see that he frequently employs fugues and canons that suddenly resolve into moments of powerful unison ensemble work, only to shift into something else again. He can be tender or bawdy, whimsical or satirical, resonating with everything from Gilbert and Sullivan to Monty Python.

The movement material Morris gives the singers is definitely much larger, more exacting and more interesting than I have ever seen used in an opera. My favorite part is The Frost

Scene, a duet between Cupid, sung by the vivacious soprano Mhairi Lawson and The Cold Genius, brilliantly played and sung by baritone Andrew Foster-Williams. You can be sure that Lawson outdoes Betty Furness by miles when she opens and closes the refrigerator (a Westinghouse?), standing front and center stage, first to reveal an icy face in the upper compartment and then the frozen body in the lower one. When, with the freezer door open, the Cold Genius begins to sing, Purcell even has him stuttering through his chattering teeth; he also begins to move his fingers in a contorted, halting manner. Finally he kicks open the lower door and half-falls out onto the floor, dressed in a gray suit, sporting a gray homburg and carrying a gray umbrella. As he sings, he also continues to slowly thaw out his body, gingerly increasing the movements of his stiff limbs. The lyrics, "'tis Love that has warm'd us," lead the dancers to drop their blankets and cavort in circles around the singers. The final tableau has the Cold Genius laying on his back on a low platform stage right, stroking his upright umbrella.

Mizrahi's costumes juxtapose bits and snatches of period clothing and accessories with modern dress and gadgets: a helmet with plume and mail gloves next to a gold lame jacket and aviator goggles; lots of ruff collars, jeans, breastplates, camouflage pants, old-fashioned military jackets and red vinyl hotpants.

Lobel's use of moveable red curtains and platforms to create new scenes is very effective. At first I thought there was no backdrop and we were looking at the brick wall at the back of the theater. Then I noticed that there were details to suggest the wall of a castle. To create a river she uses a curtain composed of shiny mylar strips from which the singers and dancers emerge. Doors on wheels are pushed on and off stage, so that performers can rush in and out of them. It all works beautifully.

English critics loved or hated it. I totally understand the former and can only force myself to try to understand the latter. Did they have unrealistic expectations from the opera itself or from director Morris? Perhaps they felt the light-handed treatment was more suited to a pantomime in a music hall than an opera at the Coliseum? My own distant recollections from the time I lived in London of seeing the English National Opera include: "Rigoletto" done in 1950s New York Mafia style, "Orpheus in the Underworld" as a 1980s British political/social commentary, "Pagliacci" in the 1940s with a flatbed truck used as the itinerant players' stage and "Cavalleria Rusticana" set during World War II. So why not "King Arthur" as a 21st century vaudeville show?