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Living through Words and Dance: Rusalka at Opera Ballet Vlaanderen

Dvořák – Rusalka

Rusalka – Tineke Van Ingelgem

The Prince – Kim Kyungho

Vodník – Goderdzi Janelidze

Foreign Princess – Karen Vermeiren

Ježibaba – Maria Riccarda Wesseling

Wood Sprites – Annelies Van Gramberen, Zofia Hanna, Raphaële Green

Gamekeeper – Daniel Arnaldos

Kitchen Boy – Raphaële Green

Hunter – Justin Hopkins

Dansers Opera Ballet Vlaandere, Koor Opera Vlaanderen, Symfonisch Orkest Opera Ballet Vlaanderen / Giedrė Šlekytė.

Stage director – Alan Lucien Øyen

Opera Ballet Vlaanderen, Antwerp, Flanders, Belgium. Sunday, December 22nd, 2019.

A consistent aspect of the work of Opera Ballet Vlaanderen is its willingness to give opportunities to artists, whether in the form of role debuts, or bringing in new talent from outside the conventional operatic world. It's precisely this daring nature that makes Opera Ballet Vlaanderen one of the most interesting and stimulating theatres to visit. For this new production of *Rusalka*, the house engaged renowned Norwegian choreographer, Alan Lucien Øyen, to make his operatic debut.



(https://operatraveller.files.wordpress.com/2019/12/e294acc2aefilipvanroe-rusalka-generale_dsc1127.jpg)

Photo: © Filip Van Roe

Øyen gives us a staging that is highly visual, one that magnifies the music and heightens its effects. At first, I wasn't entirely sure it would work. Øyen uses a corps of dancers to double the principal characters – for instance, Rusalka, the Prince and Vodník all have dancer doubles (but not Ježibaba, interestingly). While a further group of six dancers either dance with the wood sprites, or add further visual interest – though it must be admitted that the presence of some buff, shirtless, bearded gentlemen dancers was initially rather distracting. The single set was an abstract structure that revolved around the stage.



(https://operatraveller.files.wordpress.com/2019/12/e294acc2aefilipvanroe-rusalka-generale_dsc1095.jpg)

Photo: © Filip Van Roe

Within this premise, Øyen gave us a staging that was deeply insightful. Whereas, so often, the idea of integrating dance with singers can feel like an afterthought; here, Øyen completely integrated both the singers and the dancers into the action. It meant that we had the distinct feeling of watching another aspect of a character's psyche – the part that can't be verbalized but that, instead, is felt. Øyen went even further, he created so many memorably moving stage

pictures, by using the set as an additional dimension to the storytelling. When the Prince first engaged with Rusalka, the set provided unseen pathways to an uncertain future. Similarly, as Rusalka watched the ball from outside the structure, we could see her presence, but her isolation was palpable. Seeing singing characters engage with dancers, and vice versa, genuinely reinforced this impression of a world where emotion and rationality were intertwined.



(https://operatraveller.files.wordpress.com/2019/12/e294acc2aefilipvanroe-rusalka-generale_dsc0955.jpg)

Photo: © Filip Van Roe

Nowhere more so than in a devastating final tableau – the image of Rusalka and the Prince finally finding the connection they longed for, for so long, in death. Øyen proved himself a very fine director of singers, creating a universe populated with highly believable and passionate personalities. Ježibaba was less a villainous harridan in Maria Riccarda Wesseling's hands, than a woman destined to use her powers, but was aware of the impact they would have. There were suggestions of a backstory between Ježibaba and Rusalka, but this felt under-explored in the sole misfire of the show.



(https://operatraveller.files.wordpress.com/2019/12/e294acc2aefilipvanroe-rusalka-generale_dsc0901.jpg).

Photo: © Filip Van Roe

Musically, this afternoon's performance confirmed the consistently high standards of the house and the imaginativeness of its casting. Which it most certainly did in Giedrė Šlekytė's conducting and the playing of the house orchestra. Šlekytė is a new name to me but one I think we'll be seeing a lot more of. She led a reading of glorious romantic sweep, alive to myriad colours in the orchestration – whether in placid muted strings or threatening lower brass. She brought out the folksy aspects of the score, but also its intrinsic longing. The orchestra responded to her with playing of tremendous warmth and depth of sound. This was a big, bold reading, enhanced by the generous acoustic of this medium-size house. There was a warmth and glow to the string sound that I found wonderfully enveloping. Her tempi were always natural, built on a firm rhythmic footing and a strong bass line. The chorus sang with immaculate blend – no war of vibratos here. The quality of the playing, choral singing and conducting were genuinely world class.



(https://operatraveller.files.wordpress.com/2019/12/e294acc2aefilipvanroe-rusalka-generale_dsc0888.jpg).

Photo: © Filip Van Roe

As is often the case at this address, the two principal roles have been double cast. Tineke Van Ingelgem (sharing the run with Pumeza Matshikiza – pictured) was making her role debut in the title role this afternoon. She gave us a passionate ‘song to the moon’, searching for longing and bringing this to the fore. The voice has an agreeable brightness, enhanced by a fast vibrato. It does sound to my ears like a fundamentally lyric instrument being pushed to be a size bigger – intonation came in and out of focus and she frequently either undershot or overshot at the top. She had clearly worked extremely hard on the language and rose to a final scene of sheer, passionate abandon. It was undeniably exciting and, in her dedication to giving us so much of herself, Van Ingelgem inspired admiration.



(https://operatraveller.files.wordpress.com/2019/12/e294acc2aefilipvanroe-rusalka-generale_dsc0665.jpg).

Photo: © Filip Van Roe

Her prince was Kim Kyungho, formerly of Oper Leipzig. He certainly had the high notes for the role, soaring fearlessly as the evening progressed. It’s a slightly narrow, medium-weight tenor, but with good sheen, and he’s an engaging stage presence. While his Rusalka had clearly worked hard at finding meaning in the text, Kim appeared to be using a relatively limited palette of tone colours. Still, I imagine that he could be a very useful artist.



(https://operatraveller.files.wordpress.com/2019/12/e294acc2aefilipvanroer-usalka-generale_dsc0622.jpg).

Photo: © Filip Van Roe

Maria Riccarda Wesseling made her role debut as Ježibaba for this run. She brought out such detail in her character – spitting the text out, revelling in her portrayal, commanding and tearing up the stage. Wesseling gave Ježibaba a haunted edge, bringing her a fascinating aspect of someone who had perhaps led a completely different life to the one she had originally envisioned. The role lies slightly high for Wesseling now, the higher reaches not quite hit *à point*, but the detail that she found in the role and her undeniable stage presence made her Ježibaba utterly compelling.



(https://operatraveller.files.wordpress.com/2019/12/e294acc2aefilipvanroe-rusalka-generale_dsc0356.jpg)

Photo: © Filip Van Roe

In the role of Vodník, Goderdzi Janelidze was a revelation. The Georgian bass is the owner of a huge instrument, big and utterly healthy in sound, completely even from top to bottom. He also held the stage, bringing out all aspects of his character's personality – from regret to sorrow, but also joyfulness in the opening scene. Most definitely a name to watch. As is Justin Hopkins, the owner of a warm, rounded bass-baritone of impressive resonance as the Hunter, or Daniel Arnaldos's light, lyrical tenor with genuine character as the Gamekeeper. We also had a well-balanced trio of Wood Sprites with Raphaële Green's liquid mezzo also heard to advantage as the Kitchen Boy. Karen Vermeiren dispatched the Foreign Princes with a big, vibrant dramatic soprano – surely an Ortrud in training.



(https://operatraveller.files.wordpress.com/2019/12/e294acc2aefilipvanroe-rusalka-generale_dsc0308.jpg).

Photo: © Filip Van Roe

This *Rusalka* showed Opera Ballet Vlaanderen at its very best. Musically it was magnificent, despite a few issues here and there, showing this estimable company at the very top of its form. It also highlighted what they consistently achieve at – spotting talent and allowing it to flourish, as well as making us aware of some major talent. This *Rusalka* is a production that manages to amplify the music, to heighten its effect through movement and through deep understanding and communication of the personalities within. A splendid evening.

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