

## New York

Elizabeth Dinkova's HEARTBEAT OPERA production of *Salome* (seen on February 5) filled the black box theatre of THE SPACE AT IRONDALE with a multi-generational hipster crowd along with genuine musico-theatrical excitement. The company—celebrating its tenth anniversary and an increased budget—is known for producing revisionist interpretations that are worthwhile (Dan Schlosberg's masterfully incisive chamber reductions being perhaps the key element) but they haven't always fully coalesced or avoided moments of self-laudatory snarky transgressiveness for its own sake. Here—in this most transgressive of plays and scores—everything served the whole, surely in part due to Dinkova's decision to perform in English (the outmoded translation notwithstanding) and let the verbal points do more work than usual. I've never seen the work achieve more genuine (and genuinely troubling) sensuality than here. A committed cast of seven delivered a slightly pruned (and slightly Wilde-augmented) text, with some reassignments. For example, the incisive mezzo Melina Jaharis paired a most definitely female Page with the Slave and also took some of Salome's lines. Her performance, and that of the sturdy bass-baritone Jeremy Harr—voicing both Soldiers, the First Nazarene, the Cappadocian and even some of the reactions (mercifully absent save for some video footage) of the Five Jews—remained alertly part of a multivalent drama of desire and faith. Leading up to Jokanaan's execution, everyone took part in a kind of orgy in the glass box where the prophet was confined. At evening's end, the disgusted Page took a gun and slaughtered everyone else.

Imaginative costumes (Mika Eubanks) and lighting (Emma Deane) upped the purely visual interest, as did Narraboth (the impressive David Morgans) manning a security video console and Patrick Cook's unguardedly louche Herod doing a strip-poker style disrobement at the behest of Summer Hassan's scarily determined Salome. Probably the two clarion tenors would be the cast members most suited to their parts in larger venues. But Manna K. Jones made a classily phrased, soprano-tinged Herodias. In a large opera house the light baritone Nathaniel Sullivan—a fervent though scantily clad Jokanaan looking like an Abercrombie & Fitch model, clearly tempted by Salome's blandishments—might realistically

*Summer Hassan (seated) as Salome for Heartbeat Opera, with Manna K. Jones and Patrick Cook as Herodias and Herod*



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offer Harlekin or Flamand, but he gave a terrifically intense, musical performance opposite the bravely secure-toned Hassan. Sometimes cast changes confirm a staging's worth. On February 9 the alternate Salome, Francesca Federico, took the stage and also struck sparks, with a very different physique, voice and personality. Both Salomes suggested pampering but also overstimulation and abuse. Hassan seemed more the naive 16-year-old still coming to terms with her maturing body, while Federico suggested a first-year university student desperate to put distance between herself and a very unstable 'home'. Both approaches worked; it's a tribute to Dinkova and the performing ensemble that changes in emphasis were accommodated. One of the eerily effective factors in Hassan's success was her tone's relative coolness. Federico showed a brighter, sparkier timbre, plus the willingness—perhaps because she had only one performance to sing—to go for broke vocally in tackling the final scene. The music director Jacob Ashworth clearly knew what suited each soprano and blended his forces accordingly. Throughout, he led the ingenious mix that Schlosberg offered up—eight clarinets, occasionally doubling sax (for the Dance itself), recorder and electric guitar, plus two terrific percussionists, Katherine Fortunato and Stella Perlic—with elan and drive. In this intimate rendering, Heartbeat set the bar high for the Met's upcoming new *Salome*.

MANNES OPERA and Mannes Orchestra collaborated on a spirited *Alcina* (seen on March 7) at the GERALD W. LYNCH THEATER. In Dedalus Wainwright's corporate hotel lobby-like set (a yacht-length sofa loomed large in the blocking) the director Sam Helfrich concentrated on human foibles rather than magical transformations—though Derek Van Heel's lighting differentiated between the characters' reality and their projected dreams. Juilliard has the advantage of having a dedicated Baroque Music Institute. Here at Mannes the conductor Geoffrey McDonald achieved decent results on modern instruments. The players fared better in slow music than in rapid passagework: the higher strings floundered in the Act 3 Sinfonia and the horn could not keep pace with Ruijia Dong's heroics in Ruggiero's 'Sta nell'Ircana'. But the vital solo obbligato contributions impressed, particularly Andrew Koutroubas's cello. Cuts were to be expected. But too often we heard only the initial A section followed by the B section followed by an instrumental modulation, damaging the structure; it was a shame, as much of the singing (and ornamentation) was so capable. In my experience it's best just to excise the boy Oberto—who's not in the Ariosto source and is as annoying to the audience as he is to Alcina. (That said, the light soprano Yoonji Kim offered a lovely 'Tra speme e timore'.) One unforgivable cut came as the valiant chorus—amusingly deployed by Helfrich—emerged from the darkness of their bewitched state; did Beethoven know this scene in crafting *Fidelio*? We lost the heartbreaking solo lines ('Io fui belva ... io sasso') in which individual choristers remember their previous fates. Not every directorial gambit worked, but nothing offended or took refuge in slick or twee cliché.

Throughout, Brooke Jones as Alcina showed exceptional vocal talent, emotional nuance and theatrical acumen: she is a singer to watch. She shared ease in fioritura



and a similar bright timbral shimmer with Jooyeon Park's delightful Morgana. They sounded like plausible sisters. 'Ombre pallide' and 'Ama, sospira' were particular highlights. I wasn't surprised to learn that both sopranos—plus the fine, long-breathed mezzo keenly portraying Bradamante, Marcella Astore—study with Amy Burton, whose stylish New York City Opera Romilda, Ginevra and Angelica set local standards.

Dong's Ruggiero showed a beautiful, wide-ranging mezzo and sound technique; she needs to work on inhabiting the text more fully and (in repeated passages) variously. She has much potential, though. The two men were less special, but that's partly the nature—and perhaps one message—of *Alcina*. Zhedong Ren's tenor still needs tonal filling-out, but he articulated passagework with admirable accuracy. David Khang was pleasantly mellow in sound and action as the sage Melisso.

DAVID SHENGOLD

## Sarasota

The double bill of Mascagni's *Cavalleria rusticana* and Leoncavallo's *Pagliacci* has been a staple of the SARASOTA OPERA repertoire, and the revival of the company's 20-year-old production that opened the 2025 winter festival on February 15 showed why. David P. Gordon's impeccably detailed set (along with the lighting of Ken Yunker and costumes of Howard Tsvi Kaplan) brought an uncanny sense of 19th-century time and place to the SARASOTA OPERA HOUSE, from *Cav*'s Easter morning in a Sicilian

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