

# A Savage Salome, A Powerful Prophet

## OPERA REVIEW

**SALOME.** Music by Richard Strauss. Libretto by Hedwig Lachmann, based on Oscar Wilde's play. Directed by Ian Judge. With Eilana Lappalainen, Linda Roark-Strummer, Richard Berkeley-Steele and Mark Delavan. New York City Opera Orchestra conducted by George Manahan. Attended Tuesday night. New York State Theater, Lincoln Center. Repeated tomorrow and Oct. 9, 17 and 20.

By Justin Davidson  
STAFF WRITER

New York City Opera surpassed itself Tuesday night with a performance of Richard Strauss' molten "Salome" that must have taken even some inside the company by surprise. The orchestra, fiercely bent on self-improvement since George Manahan took it over six years ago, conceded nothing to the score's Alpine challenges. In two ceaseless hours of gale-force music, the intensity never flagged, the contours never blurred and the orchestra never swamped the singers. In this opera, a list of pitfalls avoided is not meager praise.

In this new production, directed by Ian Judge and beautifully designed by Tim Goodchild, the action roils within a hothouse ringed with slender palms and bound by a staircase that coils down from the flies. A bloated moon and a saner world are visible through the glass. Inside, the atmosphere is pumped full of music that spreads Salome's venom in searing, airless blasts. Characters and audience are sealed inside their own transparent cage.

What keeps them all there is the overflowing inventiveness of Strauss' score, which mingles sensuousness and rage until there is no telling them apart. The bond between sex and death is not just a theme of the opera; it is its very stuff, infused in the ravishingly painful dissonances and the spumes of melody. There is not a note of love or redemption here: It is a tone poem about the destructiveness of pure desire.

The burden of generating much of this intensity fell on Eilana Lappalainen, a Canadian soprano who couldn't possibly be as young as she looks or as formidable as she sounds. She is a major discovery: Small and pretty, she played Salome as a savage child, whose petulance erupts into paroxysms of sexual fervor. But her voice is muscular and mature, twining through the luxuriant orchestration and demonstrating that, even in the

throes of Straussian hysteria it is possible not to scream. She demanded the head of Jochanaan in an amiable murmur and even when she cut loose, did so with supple vocal control. (She even pulled off an admirably fluid and only slightly tacky Dance of the Seven Veils, which forces most sopranos to hurl themselves into self-caricature.)

Eventually, though, I hope Lappalainen will convert mere anger into a more chilling insanity and find a subtler equilibrium between physical abandon and pitiless manipulation. She has within her an overpowering interpretation of Salome that will break out some day, though probably not in this production. In the meantime, she could do with a little less writhing.

Mark Delavan, on the other hand, makes a fully formed, magisterial Jochanaan, the shackled prophet (John the Baptist) whose mystical vi-



Photo by Carol Rosegg

Eilana Lappalainen, who generated much of the intensity

sions are fused with a powerful carnal presence. Delavan has a brute energy that pours mesmerizingly into his spacious baritone and gets channeled by elegant technique.

The rest of the cast — including Richard Berkeley-Steele as a grandly decadent Herod and Linda Roark-Strummer as his ineffectually imperious wife, Herodias — also was strong. But it would have been stronger had Judge, the director, not kept everyone sprinting desperately around the stage, as if trying to keep up with the 16th notes in the violins. The movement felt frenetic rather than furious, and all the agitated bodies only obscured the characters' inner turmoil. Fortunately, the singing and playing blew the murk away. ■