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Sister acts

by Jay Nordlinger

On Friday night, the Metropolitan Opera revived *Dialogues des Carmélites*, Poulenc's masterpiece, in the production by John Dexter. Dexter was an English director who lived from 1925 to 1990. This production premiered in 1977.

What does it mean for a production to "hold up"? Critics say that a production "holds up" or "doesn't hold up." I have no idea what that means. To my mind, a production is either good or not. Dexter's *Dialogues* is very, very good, and although it will someday be replaced at the Met, it will probably not be bettered, or equaled.

Perhaps I have seen this production too many times, but I sort of equate the opera with it (which is, of course, a danger).

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more solidity and heft.

In the pit on Friday night was Yannick Nézet-Séguin, the music director of the Met. He led an intelligent performance. I will now criticize. Over and over, entrances in the orchestra were imprecise, even botched. This was wearing. Also, there was sometimes a certain absence of gravitas in the orchestra: a lightweightness when there should have been

Furthermore, Nézet-Séguin and the orchestra often covered singers onstage. But, you know? This is not all bad—it is not necessarily wrong. I don't believe that the orchestra's job is ever and always to accompany the singers. Sometimes, there is a healthy competition between pit and stage. I think composers want it, and write it in.

Think Strauss! (Richard.)

Speaking of him: Years ago, I was watching and listening to Lorin Maazel conduct *Salome*. He was really “feelin’ it,” as we say in basketball. He was on fire. In the Final Scene, he and the orchestra started to cover the soprano, and Maazel tamped the orchestra down. I thought, “No, no, Lorin! Cover her!”

Dialogues des Carmélites can be hypnotic. Friday night’s performance was not especially hypnotic, though Nézet-Séguin conducted the dénouement with admirable resoluteness. Throughout the opera, his tempos were brisk—brisker than I had ever heard. Maybe other conductors’ tempos are too slow?

Nézet-Séguin’s *Dialogues* was not ethereal and otherworldly. It was bloodier and more this-worldly. There is much to be said for that. The opera is plainly bloody and this-worldly . . .



Isabel Leonard. Photo: Ken Howard.

Two singers—at least two—revived their roles from the Met’s previous run of *Dialogues*, in 2013: Isabel Leonard, the mezzo-soprano singing Blanche, and Erin Morley, the soprano singing Constance. You are perhaps bored of hearing about the perfection of Isabel Leonard. I am bored of writing about it. But it is so. This woman was impeccable on Friday night: in sound, intonation, diction, expression, characterization . . . Boring, boring, boring. (No, actually: great.)

Let me offer an aside: I had not quite remembered that this mezzo, Leonard, can go up so high.

As for Erin Morley, her Constance was, if anything, fresher, more endearing, and more poignant than before. At the end, the audience gave her the kind of ovation usually reserved for a leading

lady, a star.

Speaking of leading ladies and stars: Karita Mattila, the semi-legendary Finn, was Madame de Croissy, a.k.a. the First Prioress. Only two seconds ago, she was baring it all as Salome; now she is wrapped in a habit as an old nun. *Tempus fugit*. She did well as the First Prioress, except for one thing: I couldn't hear her. She was faint of sound (and this was not the fault of Maestro Nézet-Séguin and the orchestra). Why was this veteran soprano cast in this mezzo or contralto role? It made a difference. The First Prioress is one of the most devastating roles in all of opera; on this occasion, it was deprived of its impact.

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Paul Corona, Karita Mattila, and Karen Cargill. Photo: Ken Howard.

Adrianne Pieczonka, the Canadian soprano, was Madame Lidoine, a.k.a. the Second Prioress. She perhaps did not sing with her most beautiful sound. But she has an invaluable quality, namely kindness. There is a kindness in her voice that is effective in such roles as Beethoven's Leonore (or Fidelio)—and Poulenc's Second Prioress. Karen Cargill, the Scottish mezzo, was Mother Marie, singing with maturity and assurance.

Without going through the entire cast, let me point out a couple of tenors: David Portillo and Tony Stevenson. The former was Blanche's brother and the latter was the Chaplain. Portillo sang

sweetly, even boyishly, providing some affecting moments. Stevenson is no kid, if I may say, but he sang with loveliness and freedom, darn near making his role a star turn.

The Met does *Dialogues* in French, its original language, but this opera works very well in English, in my opinion. Something to consider for a future run?

Jay Nordlinger is a Senior Editor at *National Review*.

His podcast with *The New Criterion*, titled “Music for a While,” can be found [here](#).