

AGRIPPINA

By George Frideric Handel

Hello. I'm Edgar Loessin with Loessin at Large. The great Irish playwright and critic George Bernard Shaw said Handel's operas were merely stage concerts, having no dramatic verity whatsoever. He lived well into his nineties but he must not have ever seen AGRIPPINA. If he did, it was not the hell-raising, often hilarious, potentially blood concoction that the brilliant director Lillian Groag has prepared for us.

One of the problems in staging a baroque opera is deciding what to do with all those musical interludes between the scenes, arias and recitatives. To the untutored ear they stop every thing until there is singing again. Not for Groag. She explores every note of them and discovers a dramatic cess pool teeming with life. She uses supernumeraries who wear white face makeup and black lip stick, pomaded hair and tuxes. They suggest decadence, like cabaret Masters of Ceremonies in pre-Hitler Germany. They are Proteans who play many little roles, and are also like a Greek Chorus or living scenery or they become phantoms who torment the principle characters.. They set the mood and place for the opera in a highly theatrical manner.

And, what a place it is under the veneer of elegance and refinement that Michael Ganio's handsome unit set suggests. In lighting, the colors of fine wines, by Michael Wierzel, are a bunch of amoral creatures working away like ambitious maggots scheming and plotting against each other.

The chief manipulator, with the soul of a panther, is Sujong Kim as Agrippina. Since last we saw her at Virginia Opera she has grown up. She's a statuesque beauty, her voice is richer and stronger, and she proves that she is an accomplished actress with depth and style. She expertly modifies her queen of mean with highly amusing ascerbic humor. Like a possessed stage mother of a talented child, she is determined to get her son Nero on the throne. Jeffrey Halili, the future emperor, is a spoiled rich kid. He's into a variety of drugs, sex, treason- -you name it. Halili has a most pleasant pure tenor sound that works well for this mixed up young man. He's a likeable perverted imp, destined to become one of the cruelest rulers of all time. Among his high profile kills might have been the apostles Peter and Paul, and his mother. But that's another story.

Ottone, a powerful countertenor, David Walker by name, makes a strong impression and is both funny and pathetic. He loves Poppea and one can easily see why as soprano Jane Redding presents her. She's a package of perfection who is beautiful, witty and fun-loving. She's a bit naughty but oh so charming as she survives the various predators around her. Claudio, Derrick Parker, has the right bass baritone strength for an emperor. He senses the underground doings involving his shaky throne with amusing bafflement. He doesn't hesitate to let us see his often unsuccessful attempts at lechery. He's very human, a depraved

nice guy. Jeffrey Mandelbaum is a distinct joy as Narcisco, not missing a single laugh. Mathew Burns as Pallante and Eduardo Castro as Lesbo are vocally strong and memorable.

Everybody in this cast is simply right including the supernumeraries that I mentioned first.. How often does that happen? With their musical skills and sophisticated acting, this company establishes a high style of crispness and clarity of intent that could do justice to a Noel Coward play. Peter Mark's 19 piece orchestra transports one to another era with warmth and grace.

It's all thumbs up for this AGRIPPINA with special accolades for Diamond Lil Groag.

This is Edgar Loessin with Loessin at Large and I'll see you at the next opening