

POCAHONTAS

An opera in one act

Linda Tutas Haugen, Composer

Joan Vail Thorne, Librettist

Hello. I'm Edgar Loessin with Loessin at Large. At the beginning we hear these words from a Mayan poem: "It is not true that we come here only to live, we come only in passing, we do not own all that is given to us." Thus begins a fascinating tale of beauty taken away, of vision distorted by betrayal and lies. Librettist Joan Vail Thorne has concentrated on the mystery surrounding the life of Pocahontas. As she states emphatically, perhaps to many times, that this is a story, not history, but mystery.

Composer Linda Tutas Haugen has combined Inative American songs with quotations of early 17th century European music the colonists would have known with her own music which is lyrical, pleasingly simple and innocent. There is also considerable spoken dialogue and narration. Marlene Pauley conducts a group of nine musicians who play contemporary and traditional native American instruments most effectively. Pam Berlin has conceived natural, candid and visually interesting staging in Michael Schweikardt's inventive unit set. The action is clean and clear and mercifully free of "Indian" cliché. Todd Rosenleib's appropriately ritual like dances are in the same style.

The creative team was handed a remarkably fine cadre of singers by their producers, the Virginia Arts Festival and the Virginia Opera. While adhering to the few tenuous facts we have about the main character, librettist Thorne plays freely with time. We see the young woman Pocahontas and the woman as a child, sung by Laura Choi Stuart and Dawn Zahralban respectively. Each lady has a sweet, just right lyric soprano voice, is a skilled actress and they look enough alike to be sisters. Lisa Lockhart, forgotten by history, is touching as the mother of Pocahontas. Her father, Powhatan, is sung by Andrew Fernando withy majesty and dignity. Baritone Jason M.Kaminski as priest Uttamatomakin speaks and sings with god like authority. A most pleasing tenor, Brandon Wood, is a dashing, likable John Smith. The handsome and virile bass, Branch Fields III, as John Rolfe has a voice with many colors and the force of a pipe organ.

My only concern with the piece is the one dimensional aspect of the characters. While one does not want the librettist to distort or

romanticize what Jamestown history we know, a little more imagination would be welcome. The best scene is one in which John Rolfe is teaching Pocahontas English. It is the only scene with subtext as they fall in love during the lesson. Here the work rises beyond the level of historical outdoor dramas to fine theatre.

Thorne and Haugen do find many moving moments to make their work soar with significant meaning. The atrocities of our past live on. The pain of recollection is very present. In a plea for understanding, someone sings "we all see the world by the same light". That is another mystery yet to be solved. This is Edgar Loessin with Loessin at Large and I'll see you at the next opening.