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Review: ‘Doctor Atomic’ Brings the Bomb Home to New Mexico

Doctor Atomic NYT Critic's Pick

By Zachary Woolfe

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Credit Ken Howard

SANTA FE, N.M. — “We must first devise a demonstration,” a nuclear scientist sings in the opera “Doctor Atomic.” “Where there won’t be any people. Not on a city. Or a demonstration right here in the desert.”

As he delivered the line on Saturday evening at Santa Fe Opera, the tenor Ben Bliss gestured toward the vast landscape beyond the stage, still visible to the audience as the sun set. And for the first time in the opera’s history, there was no need to suspend disbelief.

We were, indeed, right here in the desert where “Doctor Atomic” — a turbulent reflection on J. Robert Oppenheimer and the lead-up to the first test of the bomb developed at Los Alamos, a short drive from Santa Fe — takes place. After its premiere in San Francisco in 2005, a Metropolitan Opera run in 2008, performances all over the world, and the release just weeks ago of a ferocious recording conducted by its composer, John Adams, the work had come home.

Superbly performed (it runs through Aug. 16), it struck me as both clearer and stranger than it had when I last saw it, a decade ago in New York. Peter Sellars — who compiled the libretto from a collage of primary sources and poetic texts, and who directed the San Francisco premiere — has returned to “Doctor Atomic” in a spare state of mind.

Gone are many of the trappings of that elaborate, 1940s-noirish first production (to say nothing of the positively steroidal Met presentation, staged by Penny Woolcock), including hordes of dancers and a scale replica of the explosive “gadget.” Here in Santa Fe, the costumes are contemporary street clothes, with the youthful physicists looking like engineers at a Silicon Valley start-up; just a handful of dancers thrust and wriggle to Emily Johnson’s choreography.

There’s almost no set except a gigantic silver sphere hanging a few feet above the stage. Bomb, globe, Christmas tree ornament, disco ball: Its surface shined to a mirror, this orb can be anything you project onto it.

Mr. Sellars has been at pains to flesh out the opera’s rather sketchy connection to its setting. As much a community organizer and consciousness-raiser as a director, he has brought into the staging indigenous people from the region and a group of so-called downwinders, whose families lived not far from the test site and say they suffered health problems from the resulting radiation.

The group of natives performed a steady, rhythmic sacred corn dance a few minutes before the performance began, and returned for a surreal reprise, to Mr. Adams’s roiling music, during the fraught, chaotic countdown to the test. The downwinders stood, in silent rebuke, as scientists and an Army general argued about whether to notify the communities that might be affected by the blast. (I’ll let you guess which side won.)

Moving and palpably real, these interventions further pulled the opera from the naturalism of its early stagings, and felt of a piece with the terse weather reports and dense, dreamlike poetry — Donne, Baudelaire, Muriel Rukeyser, the Bhagavad Gita — in which the characters attempt to express themselves.

To Mr. Sellars’s credit, the involvement of these local communities is stirring but not exactly uplifting. It was presumably unintentional, but telling, that the solemn preperformance corn dance, a ritual rarely given outside the dancers’ pueblos, took place as much of the audience noisily took its seats, air-kissed, and chatted: thousands of rich white people, ignoring the natives as they always have.

The work is, frankly, less boring than I remembered — those weather reports feel tighter here than at the Met — though the passionately precise new recording is also a revelation in this regard. With so much pared away in the staging, the weird intensity of the libretto’s poetry is stronger and less jarring, its tumble of eroticism and morbidity more evocative; the sense that the bomb has contaminated these characters and their relationships is more explicit. Mr. Adams’s score now comes across as a steady knotting of the stomach, gradually ratcheting tension by alternating lush, ominous sensuality and pummeling intensity.

And it is well served by the conductor Matthew Aucoin — his orchestra committed, if less rivetingly rigorous than the recording’s — and an excellent cast. While Ryan McKinny’s extremes aren’t as epic as those of Gerald Finley, who originated the role with a uniquely wounded authority, he is a handsomely frustrated Oppie. Julia Bullock, her voice warm and her presence daringly prickly, is a richly complex Kitty Oppenheimer. Mr. Bliss, Andrew Harris, Daniel Okulitch and Meredith Arwady make vigorous impressions in smaller roles; the Santa Fe chorus, drawn from the company’s young artist program and directed by Susanne Sheston, is as always a wonder.

Yet a certain emptiness remains at the work’s core. “Doctor Atomic” was commissioned as an American “Faust,” but the opera’s Oppie, who’s never as thrilled about the bomb as the man himself was, doesn’t get to revel in Faust-like triumph. And our sense that he’s surrendered his integrity for

personal gain is, as the critic Daniel Mendelsohn wrote in 2009, contingent on particular assumptions — debatable, at least — about the morality of the bomb.

Nor is this Oppenheimer the Prometheus figure he styled himself in real life. To revive that legend, of a life-giver punished for his hubris, the opera would have needed to push into the decades beyond World War II, into Oppenheimer's outspoken, complicated regrets and the disgrace of the stripping of his security clearance.

“Doctor Atomic” embraces one thing opera does do well: spectacle. (There's the disco-ball bomb, everyone dancing beneath it.) But focusing entirely on “will it explode?” — the only real question of the long second act — stints the human, the deeper work opera can do.

Now a teenager, “Doctor Atomic” still conveys a feeling of grief — here in Santa Fe a very local variety — rather than telling a story.

Doctor Atomic

Through Aug. 16 at Santa Fe Opera; santafeopera.org.

<https://www.nytimes.com/2018/07/15/arts/music/doctor-atomic-santa-fe-opera-review.html>