



**David Hertzberg, *composer***

## HEDONIST *Hedonist*

### David Hertzberg's *Rose Elf* Leaves Haunting, Evocative Impression



By Rebecca Richardson JUNE 11, 2018  
Photos: Matthew Placek

Immersive theatrical experiences are no stranger to the average New Yorker and seem to be appearing with more and more consistency as arts organizations strive to produce honest, meaningful, and relevant new works. That being said, **I couldn't help but feel like I was diving into the unknown as I approached the impressive, towering gates of the Green-Wood Cemetery in Brooklyn to see the highly anticipated world premiere of David Hertzberg's *The Rose Elf*.**

**Something felt different and unexpected about this work.** The cool, drizzly evening perfectly blanketed the environment for Sunday's performance and set a meditative tone for the entire evening. Upon arriving at the front gates of the cemetery, I was directed to the nearby chapel for a pre-show whiskey tasting provided by Virgil Kaine Lowcountry Whiskey Co.

Once the start of *The Rose Elf* approached, all of the gracious whiskey-drinkers were transported by trolley along the winding paths of the cemetery to the catacombs. The narrow passageway of the crypt, with seats arranged along both walls so that action could unfold down the center aisle, was lit solely by the green glow of the glow sticks provided to each audience member and the soft lighting in the orchestra pit at the far end of the tunnel. Powerful, disturbing, and clocking in at just an hour in length, ***The Rose Elf* was captivating and intoxicating from start to finish,** fueled by the lush orchestration and illustrious singing.

*The Rose Elf* was presented in conjunction with New York Opera Fest and premiered as the inaugural performance for The Angel's Share, a new classical concert series performed in the catacombs at the Green-Wood Cemetery. Based on Hans Christian Andersen's gruesome fairy tale, Hertzberg wrote both the score as well as the libretto for the opera, as he did for *The Rose Elf*'s predecessor, *The Wake World*. Though supertitles were projected for the highly poetic libretto throughout most of the performance, the diction from each singer was so clear that I barely found myself glancing at the words. The orchestra brilliantly propelled the drama of *The Rose Elf* with its enormous musical peaks and almost deafening percussion at times.

Using only physical movement, a small handful of sparse lighting cues, and a few prop flowers, the four singing actors transformed the stark performance space into a blossoming



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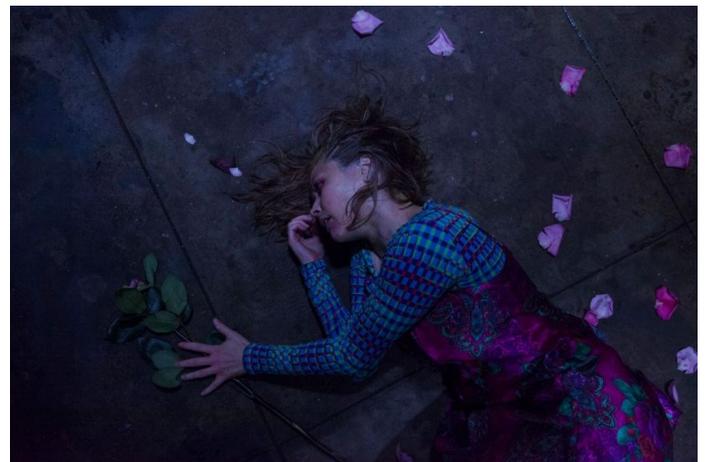


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playground for the imagination. Mezzo-soprano and rising powerhouse Samantha Hankey starred as the Elf and did not disappoint. Hertzberg's technically difficult score caused no hesitation from Hankey, her luxurious and vibrant sound navigating an enormous range with seeming ease and impeccable dramatic intent. The chemistry between The Girl/Luna (Alisa Jordheim) and The Beloved/Horus (Kyle Bielfield) stole my heart, making their twisted, horrific demise all the more palpable. The Brother (Andrew Bogard) shook the stone walls with his resonate low register and penetrating gaze.

The tremendously physical staging by R. B. Schlather was a feat in itself—particular admiration goes to Bogard for dragging The Beloved's lifeless body down the long tunnel of the catacombs. The costumes and makeup consisted of floral prints and colorful smears for Jordheim, Bielfield, and Bogard, silver sequined dress, ghostly white face, and red stained hands and mouth for the Elf. Despite three of the four characters being human, the vision of the entire ensemble came off as haunting and otherworldly. The bright hues of the floral garments provided a striking contrast to the barren surroundings and murky subject matter.

While I had read the translated fairy tale prior to attending the opera, Hertzberg and Schlather's interpretation of *The Rose Elf* came across clearly without any hint of ambiguity. I could tell that they had a specific, detailed vision for unveiling the story, and that vision was magnificently executed. This succinct opera holds an enormous amount of weight and splendor. Hertzberg's soaring vocal lines and orchestral richness as well as the cast's commanding performances have stuck with me since departing the catacombs last night, and I expect that they will continue to do so for some time.



<http://hedonistshedonist.com/blog/rose-elf-review/>

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