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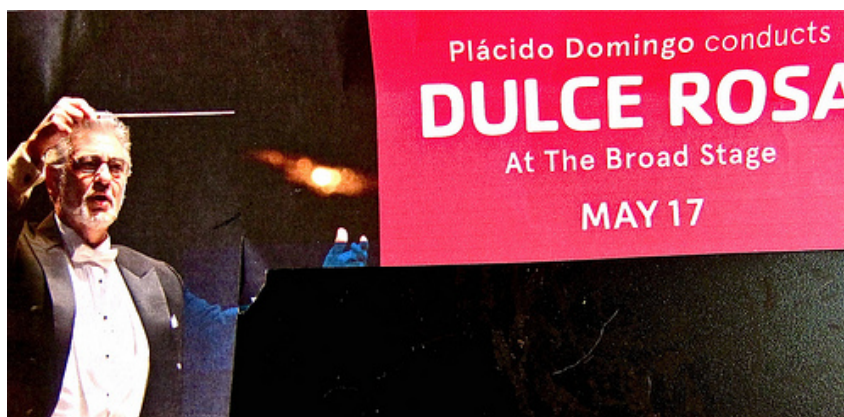
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Dulce Rosa Opera at Broad Is Magnificent!



By Jay Weston




Move over Verdi, Puccini, Bizet... (not you, Mozart)... make room for Lee Holdridge and Richard Sparks. Who? These are the guys who have created a new opera, *Dulce Rosa*, which will enter the pantheon of great operas we all should see over and over again. On Friday evening at The Broad Stage in Santa Monica (1310 11th Street, Santa Monica (310) 434-3200, thebroadstage.com), L.A. Opera's Plácido Domingo conducted his orchestra in the world premiere performance of an opera which stirred me and its audience immeasurably....so much so that hundreds of people gathered on the theatre's plaza afterwards to talk about the marvelous 'entertainment' we had just seen. (And which you can catch in its next five performances at The Broad in coming weeks.) It is entertainment, a word not often applied to opera... but the combination of gripping tale based upon a short story by famed author Isabel Allende, enthralling performances, and revolutionary 'sets' combined to bring us a shattering evening. About those sets, they are actually 'projections' by famed architectural photographer Jenny Okun, who traveled throughout South and Central America to capture several hundred images which are projected in a stunning rhythm of visual energy behind the action on stage. (I predict that this use of background imagery will become a standard for all future theatrical productions... it saves money on standing sets and provides a visual experience which no set can match.) Scenery Designer Yael Pardess coordinated this stunning experience.



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Conductor Placido Domingo and author Isabel Allende at the premiere

Composer Lee Holdridge and librettist Richard Sparks took an Isabel Allende short story called An Act of Vengeance and in the course of several years composed a tale of romance, ruin, revenge and redemption set in an unnamed South American country in the 1950s. We see a powerful just-retired father/Senator in his palatial home living with an adored, beautiful daughter... when raw politics and violent revolution intrude upon them. The young woman, sung by Uruguayan soprano Maria Eugenia Antunez, plans her revenge against the charismatic guerrilla leader (a Che Gueverra stand-in, played by Mexican baritone Alfredo Daza) who murdered her father and raped her. Placido conducted the L.A. Opera chorus and orchestra and will do four of the next five performances of it. This is the inaugural project of L.A. Opera's Off Grand series offering new operatic works in venues other than the Dorothy Chandler Pavilion. (Can you believe that the very next evening, I saw Placido conduct a powerful performance of Puccini's Tosca downtown at L.A. Opera? The man is a miracle.) This production was made possible by a generous grant from Rosemary and Milton Okun; he is the music producer who put Placido and John Denver together years ago for a fabulous album.) Dale Franzen, Director of The Broad Stage, told me that this first operatic production there is the culmination of five years of imaginative productions at the new venue. For me, the drive west to the Broad from Beverly Hills is a lot easier and faster than that shlepp downtown... is that a good word to use? Yes.

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A projection by Jenny Okun, one of several hundred striking images



Composer Lee Holdridge did the brilliant, exciting music

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...while Jenny Okun did the projections and Richard Sparks wrote the libretto

I was thrilled to meet Isabel Allende at the premiere. She is one of the most important literary figures of our time and the world's most widely read Spanish-language author. She is a formidable human rights advocate, dedicating her time and energy to the protection of women and children throughout the world through her Isabel Allende Foundation. She said that she has written 27 books which sold some 56 million copies... laughingly adding, "I'm still waiting for the money." This is a delightful, charming and very, very frank-speaking woman who told us the story of how her short story became an opera.




Another projection by Jenny of the background sets



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I sneaked a photo of the standing ovation which the participants received

“In 1987 I fell in love with a Californian and moved to the United States. We started living together and soon I realized that I had no room of my own to write. It was impossible to tackle the long project of a novel so I tried my hand at short stories, which I could write while waiting for my lover in coffee shops and parks. I came up with 23 stories, and given my state of mind (or state of heart) at the time, they were all love stories. One of the stories was called ‘Una Venganza’ and was the tragedy of a young woman named Dulce Rosa who spent years planning how to punish the man who raped her and killed her family. It doesn’t sound like a love story, does it?” She continued: “Trust me, it is. The story came to me like a trance and I wrote it down in one sitting. It was published and then I forgot it... until 20 years later when a couple of visionary artists brought it to life in a new form. And indeed, what a delightful form it is.” She concluded her comments by saying to me, “When they first played for me the beautiful music composed by Lee and the strong libretto written by Richard, as well as viewing the fantastic sets and projections created by Jenny and Yael, I was astonished and pleased beyond belief. All that talent and effort interested in bringing my story to life! By the end of that day I was on the verge of tears, and since then I have not been able to get the music and some of the scenes out of my head. They haunt me and I hope they haunt everyone who sees it.”

Never fear, Isabel, they will haunt us forever. Thank you all for Dulce Rosa.

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