

Fools of the heart

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HIGH ROMANCE VS LOW COMEDY

The COC mounts the Welsh National Opera's production of Ariadne auf Naxos. ©Clive Barda

OPERA: Scale the heights of romance with local superstar Adrienne Pieczonka and Richard Strauss's Ariadne auf Naxos

Adrienne Pieczonka is a plain-spoken, down-to-earth gal from Burlington, Ontario. She is also a huge star in the rarefied world of opera, her voice a silver clarion. Those two sides of existence come together wonderfully in Richard Strauss's opera Ariadne auf Naxos; the Canadian Opera Company production, opening at the end of April, stars Pieczonka in the title role. It's one of her signature pieces, performed to raves from Berlin, Munich and Vienna to Bilbao.

"I love, love, love the music," says Pieczonka. "I hope Toronto audiences embrace it. Granted Strauss is not Barber of Seville or La Bohème but I certainly hope audiences will give it a chance. It's funny... terribly romantic... has show-stopping arias and," she says, breaking into a smile, "it's short."

Ariadne auf Naxos is an opera within an opera. It opens backstage where an opera company and a vaudeville troupe are preparing to entertain a rich man and his guests at dinner. The Composer is mortified to discover that his serious opera and the low comedy are to be performed at the same time. The free-spirited Zerbinetta, star of the vaudeville troupe, faces off against the pompous Prima Donna, star of the opera company.

Zerbinetta has little patience for the opera's morbid heroine and her "passionate longings." Zerbinetta knows a new lover is the cure for what ails any woman. In the second half, the Prima Donna plays Greek heroine Ariadne, left stranded on the island of Naxos by her lover Theseus. Desolate and confused, she gives herself over to the god Bacchus, whom she mistakes as the messenger of death. Love soars again; Zerbinetta is vindicated.

The COC has lined up some megawatt talent. Richard Margison sings the Tenor/Bacchus, Jane Archibald sings Zerbinetta and Peter Barrett sings Harlequin — all Canadians. The Composer is sung by English mezzo Alice Coote. "She's wonderful," says Pieczonka. "I've sung this role with the crème de la crème and she's first class." Sir Andrew Davis, music director of the Lyric Opera of Chicago and former conductor of the Toronto Symphony Orchestra, makes his COC debut. "He's a great Strauss conductor," says Pieczonka. "He's [currently] conducting Capriccio at the Met which shows he's on a high level of Strauss."

"So this is a milestone. It's a real dream team." The COC production, designed by Dale Ferguson and directed by Neil Armfield, made its debut with the Welsh National Opera back in 2004 to critical acclaim; the WNO remounted it just last year.

For Pieczonka, playing the Prima Donna/Ariadne is casting against type. Zerbinetta finds Pieczonka's character pretentious and gently mocks the opera's high-falutin' love story. "I enjoy being made fun of," says Pieczonka. "My character can be so over-the-top. But I do enjoy putting it on because it isn't me. Robert Carsen [who directed the Munich Opera Festival production in 2008] had me in huge, Jackie O sunglasses, carrying a bottle of water, a small dog and Hello magazines... walking in and just flouncing through. It was so not me, but it was fun to play."

Its mix of profane and profound, the jostling of buffoonery and Greek tragedy, makes *Ariadne auf Naxos* such a lovely summation of opera. The Composer closes act one answering the question: What is music? "Music is a sacred art," he sings, "which brings together all men of courage, like cherubim around a shining throne."

"He describes music as the ultimate, the highest art form," says Pieczonka, "and it's just... I'm getting goosebumps just thinking about it. Good old Strauss just laid that out for us."

The Composer's musings are inspired by a passing moment of clarity when he realizes that Zerbinetta is a much deeper character than he had assumed. "A moment is nothing," he sings. "A glance is much."

The mysteries of the heart... Strauss can take us from Burlington to the stars. Whether a free spirit, a cynic, a clown, an artist, a heroine, or even a god, we are all powerless in the face of beautiful, yearning music. With Pieczonka as Ariadne, prepare to swoon.

Pieczonka doesn't let such purple prose go to her head. She feels that Ariadne's brand of egotistical diva is a thing of the past — mostly. "Some of my colleagues are like that... I won't name names. But I think 20 or 30 years ago, there were only a few superstars. You just had a Jessye Norman or a Kiri Te Kanawa. Now there are stars, but there are lots of good singers... a whole bevy of them, plenty to go around." And if the presence of talented colleagues isn't enough, motherhood certainly keeps Pieczonka's feet on the ground. In many ways, Pieczonka would much rather be at home, singing show tunes with her wife Laura Tucker, an accomplished mezzo, and their five-year-old daughter Grace. "Now that's fun," says Pieczonka.