

Ontario Arts review

“And the Rat Laughed”; *an opera for everyone*

Review by **Tina Gaisin**

Nov. 9th '09

This is the hardest review I have ever written and to say I was deeply moved, touched and probably in tears for most of the opera would be an understatement. Anyone who has a heart-beat after experiencing this wonderful opera would come out of it spouting superlatives; just like most of the people who saw it this weekend. The opera lasts 1½ hours without a break... after it ended I had but word to utter and that was "WOW!" The new wonderful acoustically sound facility in Richmond Hill Centre for the Performing Arts which had it's grand opening February 28th of this year, hosted "**AND THE RAT LAUGHED**" presented by Opera York. Composer is *Ella Milch-Sheriff* and is based on the book by *Nava Semel*- a child of Holocaust survivors.

Being from the generation after the Holocaust I had to endure every movie and book from Kindergarten onward, especially in Hebrew school. Being able to still visualize the graphic pictures- I have stayed away from shows or movies about the Holocaust until this play.



Einat Aronstein & Dion Mazerolle

Photo courtesy of Greg King

I have a keen understanding of what was done to the Jews in the Second World War and I know about "The Diary of Anne Frank". ATRL is nothing like that. Sung in Ivrit (Hebrew) with English Surtitles, the music is very well done and singers are all very talented with full range.

The story starts in the future and moves to the present; then the past & back again. The opera is the story and vice-versa. The plot is about surviving the Holocaust ...to understand the complexities of the opera one must narrate it.

Opening in December 31st, 2099, Lima, played by *Melanie Gall* who has a beautiful, sweet soprano voice and she seems to really enjoy her role. Stash portrayed by *Andrew Tees* has a large booming baritone voice that is so wonderful I am sure he could be heard in the balcony, even without any mike. Lima and Stash who have a dream machine they talk about God and the history of creation. The story now changes to the Saba (Grandmother). Adriana Albu is talking to her granddaughter *Angela Burns* about what she endured when she was little. This is the present- the reiteration goes back in time. *Einat Aronstein* is the little girl from the past and I think she owned the show, she was believable as an actress and her singing was excellent. *Dion Mazererolle* [the sole Israeli in the cast] plays the Priest and his characterization is convincing. The entire cast sings beautifully in Hebrew with authentic intonation, they give a Hebraic 'ta'am' to their lyrics, obviously meticulous and demanding direction. The sets are stagnant, simplistic- yet just perfect.

ATRL is a metaphor for other parts of the story. The theme of "Why, why remember?" is instilled to every Jewish person to "Forgive, but never forget!" This narrative is about the atrocities of being sent away from your parents; of not wanting to be Jewish; of greed, blame, miracles, and of being loved- then lost. It also examines the dichotomy of being too Jewish or being not enough. This is true of people's sentiments today. The symbolism used is immense and tugs at the heart strings.

. The music made my heart race as does the chilling plot progression, then it soothes as the story is spun. An impressive bonus - after the show cast spoke with the audience.

A change has transpired because of this special Opera"YRDCSB (Catholic school board in York Region). A special Symposium titled "Desire to Change" will host a 350-student audience that has previously studied the novel. It should be mandatory for every high school-aged child to see.

I must express my gratitude to *Laura* - so helpful as my host. Also to *Peninah Zilberman* - a child of survivors; without her wisdom there would not have been this visual opportunity to learn and appreciate.