

CLASSICAL MUSIC

Review: Project BLANK's 'No Exit' production makes it an opera company to watch



A scene from Project BLANK's "No Exit" opera at Bread & Salt in Logan Heights. (Courtesy of Project BLANK)

Local premiere of Andy Vores composition was sung well by a strong cast buoyed by a plucky pit band

By Christian Hertzog

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Is there a burgeoning opera scene in San Diego?

Project BLANK's latest offering, "No Exit" by Andy Vores, confirmed that they are one more company very serious about producing operas here.

Saturday evening's show at Bread & Salt in Logan Heights revealed an interesting, if somewhat problematic, chamber opera given a scrappy staging. Buoyed by a strong cast and a pit band of new music champions, "No Exit" was a piquant demonstration of Jean-Paul Sartre's aphorism "Hell is other people."

Vores adapted Sartre's lurid mindbender for Boston's Guerilla Opera in 2007, where Project BLANK's artistic director Leslie Leytham premiered the role of Inez, a sadistic lesbian bound to eternally torture (and be tortured by) her Infernal roommates Garcin, a cowardly deserter, and Estelle, an infanticidal gold-digger who craves male attention.

Dramatically, Vores' adaptation is successful, but in using Stuart Gilbert's translation, Briticisms such as "paper knife" and "glass" needlessly puzzle Americans where "letter opener" and "mirror" would work better.

Vores' music cleverly portrays the claustrophobia with frequently-heard synthetic six-note scales. The tonal harmonies they imply are always shifting.

He may have painted himself into a corner, though, with his ensemble of soprano saxophone, viola, cello, and unpitched percussion. The sparse textures permit him to deploy his scale over long stretches without harmonic monotony, but there are a limited number of timbral changes to be rung from that combo.

The rhythms of each vocal and instrumental line aren't too complicated, but Vores often has the instrumentalists play against each other in simultaneously different tempos, adding more complexity to the thin textures.

The vocal writing concentrates on recitative, relying on the instrumental accompaniment and static harmony to bind passages together.

One of the joys of chamber opera is being able to get up close to singers. This production had strong voices and emotive actors.

Miguel Angel Zazueta's supple tenor and expressions of frustration served the part of Garcin well. Mariana Flores-Bucio had a radiant soprano voice and a girlish demeanor that made her character Estelle's attempted seduction of Garcin all the more disturbing. Leytham seethed as Inez, her rich mezzo a marvel to hear.

The upper limits of baritone range were successfully traveled by Jonathan Nussbaum as the humorously demonic valet, whose one-note recitative slowly, uncomfortably climbs up the chromatic scale with each line.

The plucky band (Paul Roth, soprano saxophone; Batya MacAdam-Somer, viola; Robert Bui, cello; Nathan Hubbard, percussion) vigorously navigated the intricacies of the score without a conductor.

The decision by stage director Robert Castro and scenic designer Victoria Petrovich to deploy Brechtian devices of alienation was questionable. The set and the demon's T-shirt announced the location as the Barrio Logan Chapter of the North American Sartre Society.

Instead of a room decorated with garishly out-of-fashion furniture, we got a sterile white space with three unadorned white tables and chairs. Garcin, Inez, and Estelle appeared in single-color green, red, and blue track suits, respectively, and each received a triangularly folded piece of paper with their name on it.

Instead of stabbing Inez with a paper knife — I mean, letter opener — Estelle used a paper nameplate instead, making the climactic shocker a ludicrous moment. Because

the set was at floor level, audience members without front-row seats had trouble seeing the singers sitting or lying on the floor.

In spite of these indulgences by director and designer, Vores' opera still packed a punch.

Project BLANK's can be justifiably proud of the singing and musical performances. We look forward to Carolyn Chen's adaptation of Karel Čapek's "R.U.R." next season.

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