

Theatre Australia review for *Dialogues of the Carmelites* reviewed by 'Gordon the Optom' (11/10/2009)

'Dialogues of the Carmelites' is an opera based on a true French story, with music and libretto by Francis Poulenc. It is being performed at The Geoff Gibbs Theatre, WAAPA, 2 Bradford Street, Mount Lawley until Saturday 17th October. Nightly at 7.30 pm.

It is 1789 and the start of the French Revolution. Blanche (Morgan Cowling), daughter of a wealthy businessman (Ryan Sharp) is on her way home from church, when her carriage is attacked by a mob of peasants. Against the advice of her brother (Matthew Ward) his 'baby lamb' applies to become a novice at the Communie de Compiègne Carmelite priory. The elderly and very sick Prioress, Mother Henriette (Deborah Rogers), thinks that Blanche wishes to join for the wrong reasons, so tries to change her mind. Secretly has a soft spot for the young girl.

As a novice, Sister Blanche finds convent life hard and has only one main friend, Sister Constance (Sarah Brierty). Then one night, the Assistant Prioress, Mother Marie (Caitlin Cassidy) comes to tell Blanche that the Prioress who is dying wishes to see her and give her a final message.

The new Prioress, Madame Lidoine (Emma Blake) takes over, just as the Revolutionaries break into this enclosed Carmelite monastery, and announce that after 140 years in existence it must close, in order that the peasants can have the building.

The twenty one disalced (barefooted - but not in this performance) nuns were dispersed. Sixteen nuns stay put in the monastery, and are warned by the Father Confessor of the Convent (Jun Zhang) of the terrible danger they are in by remaining. The nuns decide to swear a vow of martyrdom and stay on. Some dressed in normal clothes and hide amongst the mob, but they are soon discovered. The mob, led by three Revolution Officers (Clint Strindberg, Nik Roglich and Matthew Gollow) arrive and the Carmelites taken to Paris, and sentenced to death. They go to the guillotine singing strongly and in unison, the 'Veni Creator' thus drowning out the curses of the mob.

This is a wonderful opus for anyone seeing opera for the first time. The libretto is in English, with surtitles, but the young voices are powerful and clear, with all of the qualities of an established, more mature performer. No one struggled with their vocal range and there was not an annoying excess of vibrato. To find such beautiful voices in a cast so young is a triumph, but to obtain such talented acting and emotion in addition is remarkable. The music ranges from light and catchy to tragically sombre, with sound effects that will jolt you (Jason Mirosevich). It would be a heartless audience member who could remain unmoved.

Sydney director and NIDA graduate, Kate Gaul, who has directed notable plays such as 'The Laramie Project' here turns her hand to opera, and a massive cast all of whom individually added to the mood of the story. Kate avoided having the performers glued to the spot for each stanza, but filled the stage with action and excitement. Special congratulations to Morgan, Deborah and Caitlin.

The playwright and composer Francois Poulenc, described by the press as half monk and half delinquent, died in 1963.

David Wickham has been a conductor for the English, Welsh and Scottish National Operas and is now coordinator of keyboard studies at WAAPA. The orchestration and feeling in the music was at times uplifting and at other moments spine-tinglingly, chilling. Under David's guidance, the 60-piece WAAPA orchestra put heart and soul into their playing for the full two hours, bringing this intensely evocative piece to life.

The wonderful costumes (Fiona Bruce, assisted by Leanne Goodall) were very varied, ranging from Blanche's father's silk smoking coat through to the revolutionaries rough rags. The nuns sackcloth habits were superbly tailored, although I thought that the brown habit was exchanged for one of white to light beige wool, Carmelite beige, which caused them to be called Whitefriars. There again the French Carmelite nuns were Jesuits, a congregation apart from the rest of the European order, so perhaps not.

The set is a simple, but extremely effective, cream stage with very few props. The major dramatic atmosphere coming from the excellent lighting (Jarrad Jenkins). A stage with no surround - 'open window' - is difficult to tackle. The moving clouds on the gauze backdrop - between the stage and the rear orchestra - with the occasional floodlight gave a calm ambience to the convent.

There are so many people that have worked very hard on this outstanding production, and whom I have not mentioned, but have played their part in creating this wonderful piece. If you don't like opera, never tried it or think you may be bored - well try this, it will convert you in one performance. An emotional experience. A triumph.