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OPERA 'GODUNOV': BETTER THAN WASHINGTON OPERA OUTDOES ITSELF IN MUSSORGSKY'S MARATHON WORK

February 15, 1999 The Washington Opera has surpassed itself. The company's

By Tim Page

production of Modest Mussorgsky's "Boris Godunov," which opened a sold-out run Saturday night at the Kennedy Center, must be counted as a near-complete triumph -- a panoply of sound and spectacle on the most elevated level. Mounting "Boris" may be likened to mounting a favorite Himalaya. It is not to be attempted by a foolhardy or inexperienced crew. For this is a long, dark, dense and deeply difficult work -- lasting more than four hours on Saturday, including one intermission. Moreover, "Boris" is brooding, sunless, fiercely ambitious, maddeningly digressive, always intellectually compelling but rather theatrically inert. Mussorgsky worked over the opera again and again, never satisfied fully, and for years the version heard most often was an arrangement and completion by his friend and admirer Nikolai Rimsky-Korsakov. The Washington Opera presentation was pure Mussorgsky -- the composer's second version, from 1874, with a few carry-overs from the original conception.

Dostoevski and, as such analogies go, it isn't a bad one. One may find these works charmless, preachy, overpopulated and overextended -- yet who will deny their magnificence? You learn to watch "Boris" in the same way you learn to read "The Brothers Karamazov." The first and principal task is to adjust yourself to what may seem a slow, heavy, desperately earnest pace -- to a cumulative power rather than a moment-by-moment diversion -and then surrender utterly to it. It takes some effort, but you will emerge a richer person, for these are genuine classics and, as Henry James once observed, "there are depths." The story is a bleak one, a sort of imperial "Crime and Punishment," during which the 17th-century Czar Boris

"Boris" has been compared to the great novels of Tolstoy and

Godunov, haunted by his youthful murder of an even younger prince, slowly goes mad with fear and remorse. Pretenders to the throne jostle and quarrel, diabolical plots are hatched; there are malevolent monks and alcoholic revolutionaries; there is a notvery-convincing love scene, and a tender interlude with Boris and his children.

vast potential that has so long remained potential. Certain lines of dialogue continue to resound today. "We have chosen a czar's murderer as our leader!" one peasant shouts in disbelieving horror; throughout much of this century, Russia was ruled by a party that not only murdered a czar, but his wife and children as well -- and then bragged about it. When Boris drops dead, Mussorgsky is very careful not to offer any fresh hope for the future; the final "celebration" is a brutally feral one, and there are already prefigurations of new trouble. By rights, a review of "Boris Godunov" should start with an appraisal of the star player, bass Samuel Ramey. But I'm going to forgo that for a moment, because the Washington Opera has presented "stars" before, sometimes to disappointing effect, as if

that were all that was required. No singer, however celebrated,

can carry an evening of music drama without a strong support

of purpose one sensed from everybody involved. For once, we

were rewarded with a real sense of the epic.

team, and what made this "Boris" so splendid was the unanimity

And so first honors to the Washington Opera Chorus, which sang

with startling power and precision in what one must assume was

a relatively unfamiliar language. Isaac Karabtchevsky led the

Kennedy Center Opera House Orchestra with knowing and

Yet the real subject of the opera is Russia itself: its chaos and

grandeur, its wisdom and backwardness, its teeming, hungry

people, its unique mixture of the European and the Asiatic, its

eloquent authority, and the musicians played their hearts out for him. The production, by Andrei Tarkovsky, was both spare and protean, while Stephen Lawless's stage direction (with the exception of a few awkward attempts at broad comedy) was appropriately majestic, a series of charged, fluid tableaux. Patrick Denniston, who plays Grigory Otrepiev, is a remarkable talent, with a high, clarion tenor voice that was equally at home in tender lyricism and heroic declamation. Bass Sergei Alexashkin was harrowingly vivid as the exhausted monk and chronicler Pimen, who has seen all, understood most of it, and forgotten nothing. As Marina, Victoria Livengood sang with welcome vocal power and intensity of expression, although she fluttered into an occasional quasi-hysteria that did not seem in keeping with this role. Alan Held brought a silent-movie, Caligari-like creepiness to the role of Rangoni the Jesuit that also went a little over the top; still, he sang with commendable nuance and chilling insinuation. Wieslaw Ochman was wonderfully oleaginous as the Machiavellian Shiusky; Joyce Castle infused spirit and spunk into the role of the Innkeeper; Daniel Sumegi was a suitably proclamatory Shchelkalov; and Stefan Szkafarowsky rang out lustily and made much good sport in the role of Varlaam, a vagabond monk. Deanne Meek, Laura Lewis and Wendy Hoffman sang sweetly as Feodor, Xenia and the Nurse, respectively. What further praise for Samuel Ramey? Suffice it to say that his electrical presence, his bounding athleticism, his keen intelligence, his dark and chimerically versatile bass voice were all put to the noblest of purposes -- a fully fleshed-out, highly complicated portrayal of the flawed Czar Boris.

by, the bodies have piled up like so many tattered rags, and Russia is lurching toward yet another disaster, his is the one voice left singing, as he cries out in grief for the Motherland. CAPTION: Samuel Ramey is authoritative as the title character in Modest Mussorgsky's "Boris Godunov." ec CAPTION: Tenor Patrick Denniston, left, as Grigory Otrepiev and bass Sergei Alexashkin as Pimen in the profoundly bleak "Boris Godunov." ec **□** 0 Comments

Ultimately, it was left to tenor Pierre Lefebvre, as a blind,

helpless simpleton, to close the evening, and he did so with

unforgettable pathos. He is the forgotten man, the cheated man,

the fool -- and, after the tragedy has ended, the parade has passed

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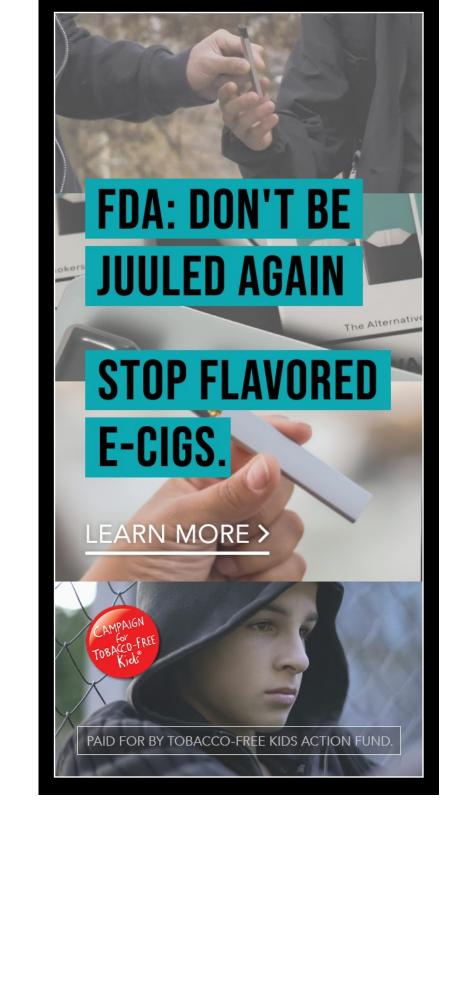
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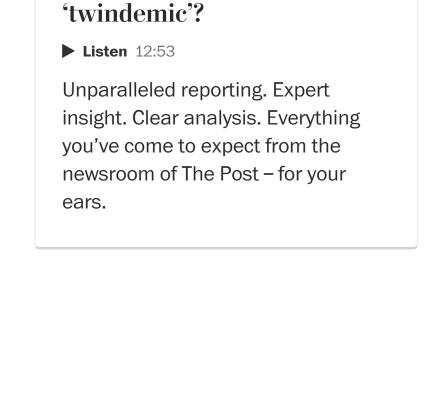
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