

ARTS

Michigan Opera Theatre drives into the pandemic era with a fresh take on a classic

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Published 12:10 p.m. ET Oct. 30, 2020 | Updated 6:48 p.m. ET Oct. 30, 2020

“It took me awhile to really come to love opera,” Michigan Opera Theatre artistic director Yuval Sharon confided after the closing of his first production since joining the Detroit-based company this fall.

“I remember being 13 and going to the opera for the first time,” he continued, “and ... it didn’t speak to me. I found it so alien and strange. My dad just kept bringing me to it, and eventually I found a fascination and then a love for it.

“But dumbing it down is not what’s really going to lead people to it,” Sharon said. “What leads people, welcomes people, is when you can present something that has the integrity of the original work, but in a way that feels open and inviting.”

That principle guided Sharon's approach to "Twilight: Gods," the bewitching, English-language adaptation of Richard Wagner’s legendary "Götterdämmerung." Staged downtown in the Detroit Opera House parking garage, "Twilight: Gods" was a treat for opera and live-performance fans who have been barred from theaters for months amid the health restraints and cancellations imposed by the coronavirus pandemic.

The three-act epic, notorious for its six-hour length, was cut to 65 minutes by Sharon, who wrote new English lyrics to fit Wagner's score. Each scene took place on a level of the six-story garage, with more than 100 parking ushers guiding eight cars at a time to and from each vignette. Singers and instrumentalists wore microphones, and drive-in guests were instructed to tune their radios to a new station for crystal-clear audio on each floor.

Sharon — a winner of the MacArthur Genius Grant known for his innovative approach to a classic genre — caused quite a stir with the Motor City's drive-in opera, resulting in a waiting

list of hundreds, even after an extra day was added to the show's run. Those who missed "Twilight: Gods" will ultimately have a chance to see it on MOT's website.

"We will provide a stream on our website in the coming weeks, so it can be shared with those who were unable to join us," said MOT President Wayne Brown. "We had something like 200 requests for car slots that could not be filled, so we look forward to making that available."

Related: Michigan Opera Theatre lands 'genius' Yuval Sharon as artistic director

Classic themes, fresh takes and a surprise

"Götterdämmerung" ("Twilight of the Gods") is the bloody culmination of Wagner's four-opera Ring cycle, which premiered in 1876 and wove the multi-generational tale of Valhalla, home of the god, and of the deities, men, and mythical creatures locked in battle for possession of a magical, golden ring which grants its wearer unlimited power.

Sound familiar?

With roots in Norse mythology, various story elements from Wagner's opus can be found in Marvel's "Thor" and "Avengers" sagas and, of course, J.R.R. Tolkien's "Lord of the Rings" universe.

The direct level of modern understanding that now comes packaged with the opera is further brought home by Sharon's straightforward English libretto ("a quarantine project," as he nonchalantly described it, adding: "I had to do something") and the savvy addition of a narrator in the form of one of the opera's original characters.

Detroit arts legend Marsha Music served as our guide through the drama as Erda, an omniscient Mother Earth figure who narrates the tale in rhyming verse that she wrote. Music's Erda, in a headdress and sherbet-hued wrap, called to mind Aretha Franklin in her 1998 video for the Lauryn Hill hit "A Rose Is Still a Rose," which placed a head-wrapped Queen of Soul in a Mother Earth role.

Music's funny, flirty, folksy poetry drew us into the characters' sprawling web while tossing out phrases like "It's about to get real" and "Come on, baby, light that fire." She made certain to draw the most direct parallel of all just before the show began, informing us that we were about to see "a real soap opera."

The boldness and the beauty of Wagner's Valhalla did not disappoint. Mezzo-soprano Catherine Martin gave an exquisite performance as Waultraute, a Valkyrie in grief

for her father, elder god Wotan (Kirk Hayhurst, in a shockingly effective silent performance), who has been consumed by his lifelong pursuit of the ring and dies in misery. Accompanied by Jinhyun Kim's guttural, weeping solo cello, the opening scene was economically effective at laying the groundwork for the upcoming action.

The show was stolen early on by bass-baritone Donnie Ray Albert and bass Morris Robinson as father-son duo Alberich and Hagen, who have also been ruined by endless wars in the ring quest but still seek its power. Their haunting duet gave way to a bellowing, de-escalating battle to see who could hit the lowest notes. The thrilling scene was accented by musical arranger Edward Windels' ingenious choice to match their voices with an accordion, bass clarinet and electric bass guitar.

A magical moment arrived in the third scene. The Rheinmaidens – the three water goddesses of Germany's Rhine River – swept in, glowing with beauty and light, and unfurled a billowing length of silky, royal blue fabric across the garage floor. As they made their entrance, the representative river flowing behind them, a bird swooped into the parking garage, arcing low over their heads while their voices soared in harmony. At once, the artifice of choreographed performance and the vibrant unpredictability of real life crested together.

To my left, a small family watched. In the passenger's seat sat a woman holding a little girl on her lap, maybe 3 or 4 years old. The little girl held a princess doll, her eyes saucer wide. It was beautiful – in a time when art, beauty and wonder have been scarce.

Then came Sean Panikkar, lightning and swagger as Siegfried, our romantic hero and golden boy, savior-to-be of fair damsel Brünnhilde. "He thinks he's all that," the Rheinmaidens sang before his entrance, and I laughed and clapped when he burst into the scene with a battle-ready strut that Panikkar borrowed from mixed martial arts star Conor McGregor.

"I tried to channel the cockiest person I know," said Panikkar in an email, "so I added a touch of that into my entrance."

A Michigander who lives in Saline with his wife, Jane, who works as a children's chorus director for MOT, Panikkar began his relationship with Michigan Opera Theatre as a freshman at the University of Michigan. "Twilight: Gods" marked his third performance.

"(Sharon) stressed that he didn't just want to do something in an apologetic way just to put performances together," Panikkar said. "He approached this project in a genuine, artistic way. A huge aspect of Yuval's career has been about performing in unconventional spaces and doing site-specific work. If ever there was an artistic director equipped to tackle the

challenges of performing in a pandemic, he is the one who could make it happen. Yuval's infectious joy combined with his brilliant artistic mind made this an easy production to jump into head first."

Ascent to the top floor, and the future

The top floor of the parking garage was the stage for the opera's dramatic climax, as Detroit's skyscrapers surrounding us under a cloudless sky. Rusted, crunched-up cars littered part of the level's "set," representing the old gods' gilded world that had been tarnished beyond salvation by relentless pursuit of the ring.

And then, Brünnhilde entered – yes – *that* Brünnhilde, the one that has been reduced to an opera stereotype, the one you saw in old Bugs Bunny cartoons, the "fat lady" who sings so you know it's all over, the broad Wagnerian broad you expect to navigate the stage like a battleship, pigtails topped with a horned helmet. *That* Brünnhilde – so, yes, even if you know nothing about opera, you know something.

But that stereotype is wrong – especially in Sharon's hands.

Brünnhilde is a revolutionary heroine. She is a mighty Valkyrie, but she is also born into a world ruled by men who cannot see beyond themselves. They never reach full maturity, driven solely by the constructs and vendettas of the men who came before them, endless lines of sons pushed to end the wars their fathers began, but weren't strong enough to fight. The cycle is continued yet again when Hagen kills her lover, Siegfried, in attempt to get the ring his father craves.

In the opera's final scene, Brünnhilde looks at the kingdom around her and sees that everything is rotten and that only greater suffering lies ahead. Her people need a true leader who can finally say "enough," yet she also cannot bear to go on without Siegfried. So she calls for her horse and rides headlong into Siegfried's funeral pyre, sacrificing herself to the flames and triggering the return of the ring to its hiding place while her father's kingdom burns down around her, taking the old gods with it.

"The gods and the corrupt world they have created are burned to the ground," the "Twilight: Gods" program reads, "with the hope that a new, better world will arise."

Christine Goerke was a sultry yet ferocious presence as Brünnhilde, styled by Suzanne M. Hanna and Scott Marr in a dazzling, flamed costume that evoked cult '80s cartoon heroine She-Ra, Princess of Power.

“This situation, this conundrum,” she said, “it’s timeless. That might seem simplistic, but we have all had someone fall off the pedestal. We have all found the strength to do the right thing in our lives, even if it comes at a cost. (Brünnhilde) is a warrior. She has an innate strength that radiates from her at all moments. We have had women like her throughout history, and continue to see them today. Perhaps they’re even more visible than they have ever been.”

Her shattering aria left jaws hanging open in cars all around me as smoke machines placed in the old, junked cars began exploding with thick, white plumes that fogged the entire parking level as Brünnhilde called for her "horse."

But this was no horse, y’all.

A pristine, gleaming white Ford Mustang – the 10 millionth off the line – took the place of a horse in this uniquely Detroit production. And, with smoke filling the air, a high note in her throat, Brünnhilde roared off to her destiny in that gorgeous convertible, leaving no doubt that we had witnessed something that could only happen in the Motor City.

Yuval Sharon and the company are to be applauded for taking a stout chestnut of the opera standards and distilling the factors that apply to today’s world in order to deliver it fresh.

“To pandemic and plague the world had succumbed,” Music intoned at one point, reminding us that “to rise from ash, first a phoenix must burn.”

“This is the kind of piece that’s hard to do even under normal circumstances,” Sharon said with a generous laugh. “We don’t have to apologize for work that’s done (under) the restrictions of COVID, but we can potentially do something we never imagined we would do. What this did was allow us to get to the heart of what Wagner was trying to say, what this piece was about. For me, that’s the real power of this piece. And so many of those statements are still valid, still hold up.”

Sharon who has said he envisions living six months in Detroit and six months in Los Angeles, sees a future for Michigan Opera Theatre as “the most progressive opera company in the country,” a goal reiterated by board chairman Ethan Davidson in an introductory filmed segment.

"We're referring to this as MOT's second act," Brown said. "Yuval has demonstrated a commitment to the city and will live here and be involved in the artistic planning for our next several years as we define various programs for indoor and outdoor activity and think about

remaining nimble during the pandemic, and find ways to increase our reach and resonance throughout greater Detroit and beyond.

"We view this blank slate as an opportunity to redefine what opera can mean for Detroit."

Dragging the show's lovers and conflicts from the vastness of the proscenium right to viewers' front bumpers infused the material with a fresh urgency, putting the audience in the middle of the action and heightening emotions and consequences.

"We discovered there were people who drove in from Cooperstown, New York; Chicago; Cleveland; Alabama," said Brown. "The one that drove from Cooperstown got in just in time to see the performance, then turned around and drove right back. That was just the kind of reach and notoriety the project was able to achieve."

After the performance, Sharon said: "Every company across the country is trying to figure a path forward, so it's nice to be able to say, 'OK, we're just going to do it. We're going to find a way there, and it does not have to compromise on the artistic experience at all. It's what gives me so much hope about these classic works. We don't need to throw them away. I love new work, and want to promote it as much as possible, but "Götterdämmerung" has so much to say when we actually let it speak to today.

"We can *help* the audience," he continued, "draw connections between what Wagner had to say then and how it applies now. And that's where opera still has so much possibility. It doesn't always have to be in a parking garage, and I'm very excited to do things in the theater. But they'll also carry that same spirit of 'Let's rethink how we're representing this, let's not be afraid to edit and rearrange to allow the pieces to continue speaking for themselves.' If we let it have a future like this, that's how the pieces can truly connect with us today."

And that makes me think about that little girl, on her mother's lap, in the car next to me.

"Even if she doesn't become a lifelong opera lover," Sharon mused, "even if she grows up and just goes, 'You know what? Even when there was a pandemic, I saw people doing opera, and they gave it their all.'

"What it means to see these images of bravery and courage and adaptability," he said. "That's the meta level of this whole project."

Coming to the Motor City from Dayton, Ohio, Duante Beddingfield is the new arts and culture reporter at the Detroit Free Press. He is a passionate storyteller who is inspired by

artists of various mediums, as well as the institutions that host, promote and cultivate their work. He can be reached at dbeddingfield@freepress.com.