

Review: 'Anatomy Theater,' an Opera, Puts Convicts Under the Knife

By Anthony Tommasini

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Evil people were once believed to be fundamentally different from the good, right down to the makeup of their bodies. Anatomists held public dissections to expose the telltale traits of moral corruption in the internal organs of criminals and convicts.

From this pernicious strand of medical history, the composer David Lang and the scenic designer Mark Dion have created a gruesome, strangely entertaining chamber opera, "Anatomy Theater," which had its New York premiere on Saturday at BRIC House in Brooklyn, the second offering of this year's Prototype festival of new music theater.



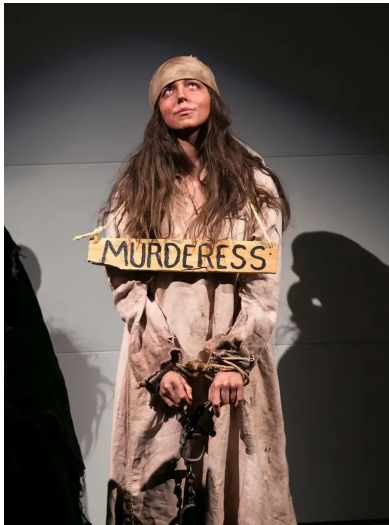
The bass-baritone Robert Osborne during this chamber opera.
Caitlin Ochs for The New York Times

This 75-minute work, which includes long stretches of spoken text (Mr. Lang and Mr. Dion wrote the chilling libretto), as well as videos (by Bill Morrison) and projections (by Laurie Olander), fits in with the mission of Prototype to foster the future of contemporary opera by opening the genre to fresh thinking and experimentation. As Sarah Osborne, the murderess at the center of the story who is executed and publicly dissected, the courageous mezzo-soprano Peabody Southwell spends most of her time on stage as a naked corpse.

The time isn't precise, but the story seems to be set in the early 18th century, perhaps in Colonial America, perhaps in England. In Bob McGrath's production, the audience members become witnesses to the trial and dissection, starting with a pre-performance gathering in which friendly women in period dress serve steins of beer and sausages.

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The piece begins with a long recitative and aria in which Ms. Southwell's Sarah admits to murdering her husband and two children but tries to explain her motives. She was just 15 when her stepfather, an abusive drunk, forced himself on her. Turned out onto the streets by her mother, Sarah lived as a prostitute. She met a man who married her, became her pimp and fathered their children. He took to cruelly beating Sarah, until she could no longer bear it.



Ms. Southwell as the doomed Sarah Osborne.
Caitlin Ochs for The New York Times

Ms. Southwell delivered the anguished phrases with an affecting blend of earthy power and poignancy. The orchestra (here, the impressive International Contemporary Ensemble, conducted by Christopher Rountree), comes into its own during the next scene, when Joshua Crouch, the caretaker of the so-called "Anatomy Theater" (played by the dynamic Broadway singer and actor Marc Kudisch), invites paying customers to watch a demonstration in which physical proof of the corruption of Sarah's body will be offered. He introduces an eminent anatomist, Baron Peel (the stentorian bass-baritone Robert Osborne), and his assistant Ambrose Strang (the tenor known as Timur), who perform the dissection.

During long stretches Mr. Lang's music adopts a Grand Guignol character. Vocal lines are set in twisting, mock-oratorical phrases as the orchestra bustles with Minimalist-like strings of racing sixteenth notes and pummeling chords. The simulated dicing of Ms. Southwell's body was bloodily harrowing, as Strang pulled out a strand of intestine, spleen and heart and examined them.

Though these theatrical episodes were musically effective, I liked the opera best when Mr. Lang's music turned more overtly expressive. During one haunting scene, the dead Sarah sings a tender aria, "My Heart," recalling the trusting organ that once knew love for her children. The orchestra cushions her singing with delicate, tart dissonances. The quartet "Where Is Evil" binds the opera's four voices into a tight matrix of counterpoint as the orchestra shifts from startling blasts to patches of elusive harmonies.

A wrench gets thrown into the demonstration when Strang reports that Sarah's organs appear to be normal. Peel asserts that her soul must be the source of her evil. The opera then ends, a little abruptly. I would have been curious to hear Mr. Lang use music to dissect the soul.

Correction: Jan. 10, 2017

An opera review on Monday about "Anatomy Theater," at the BRIC House in Brooklyn, misstated the given name of a character played by Marc Kudisch. He is Joshua Crouch, not John.

Anatomy Theater

Through Saturday at BRIC House, Brooklyn; 212-352-3101, prototypefestival.org.

A version of this article appears in print on , Section C, Page 5 of the New York edition with the headline: She's Evil, They Say. Let the Dissection Begin.

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