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'Pelleas et Melisande' dark, bizarre

By JOHN COULBOURN - Sun Media

TORONTO - There's a lot to like in the Canadian Opera Company production of Claude Debussy's *Pelleas et Melisande*.

But, once again, director Nicholas Muni and designer Dany Lyne do their level best to cover it up.

P & M opened on the stage of the Four Seasons Centre Tuesday, where it runs through May 24.

It is, of course, a revisiting of the COC's problematic 2000 production, which debuted on the stage of the Hummingbird Centre -- a little fact that might lead one to hope that at least some of the production's problems could be solved by a heavy infusion of high-quality Canadian talent (baritone Russell Braun and soprano Isabel Bayrakdarian are cast in the title roles, after all) in a space more suited to the opera's very unique demands.



And, at least in the opening scene, when the blustering Prince Golaud (bass-baritone Pavlo Hunka) encounters the fey maiden Melisande weeping by a forest pool, things look promising. It's a scene that is engaging, mysterious and oddly compelling.

But once the two of them are wed and returned to the bizarre kingdom of Allemonde, where Golaud's grandfather, King Arkel (bass Richard Wiegold) reigns, things go off track and that's pretty much where they stay for the duration of the three hour-plus production.

The problem here is two-fold.

First, there's Lyne's dark and bizarre vision, manifested here in her set and costume design.

Hers is most definitely a post apocalyptic take on the troubled kingdom, and in the end, it resembles nothing so much as a head on collision in the middle of nowhere between two trains, one loaded with paintings by the late Jackson Pollack and the other crammed with enough discount Chinoiserie to open a dollar store or stage a send-up of the forthcoming Olympic opening ceremony.

In short, it's not a set designed to showcase the delicate and ultimately tragic romance that springs up between Melisande and Golaud's younger half-brother, Pelleas.

But, not to worry, for director Muni doesn't seem terribly concerned with telling that part of playwright Maurice Maeterlinck's tale anyway, and that's the second problem.

Instead, Muni concerns himself with moving his players through the action like they were swimming in oil and weighed down by the cares of the world. While the tale demands that the romance between the two be innocent and largely unconsummated, Muni carries it all to quite ridiculous levels -- quite literally, in fact, courtesy of Lyne's split-level set design.

Far from being overcome by Debussy's music -- a beautiful but demanding and impressive piece of work that nonetheless often fails to engage on a visceral level, despite the best efforts of the COC Orchestra and conductor Jan Latham-Koenig -- the problems seem to be exacerbated by it and finally, that music feels as weighed down as the production itself.

So it all comes together to render the evening all but intolerable for all but opera's most devoted fans, judging from the substantial portion of the opening-night audience that voted with their feet during the production's only intermission and simply went home.

The fact that the principals were doing some superb work; **that Thomas C. Hase's lighting design was doing a bang-up job of underlining the war between light and darkness that is so integral to the story**; that a supporting cast that included mezzo-sopranos Erin Fisher and Barbara Dever and bass Alain Coulombe were doing their best to get things airborne. It all proved secondary to a design and a directorial vision that simply doesn't serve to pull its audience into the story.

And so, in the end, it was in fact the ending that many people seemed to enjoy the most -- a celebration not so much of the fact that it was superbly staged or deeply moving, but rather that it simply had, and not a moment too soon.