

Wrocław

Palm trees in Poland? Natalia Kitamikado's set for Barbara Wiśniewska's new production of *Julietta* at OPERA WROCŁAWSKA appeared to depict an unspecified, run-down resort on the Côte d'Azur, to judge by the palms and beaches glimpsed at the start. Yet an 'Uwaga' sign ('Beware' in Polish) was clearly visible. Despite its wonderful beaches, the Baltic coast of Poland's nearest palm is probably the fake tree in the heart of Warsaw, an artist's tribute to the Aleje Jerozolimskie (Jerusalem Avenue) on which it stands. To add to the confusion, there's the mysterious line in Act 1, scene 7 when Michel is asked 'Avez-vous jamais été à Varsovie?' (the opera was performed in Wrocław in its French version). Ultimately, it's perhaps fitting that an opera all about memory—or rather the loss of it—should be a little vague as to exactly where it's set: in Martinů's surrealist masterpiece, like the Georges Neveux play on which it is based, *Juliette, ou la Clé des songes*, the Parisian bookseller Michel is haunted by the memory of a woman he once met in an unidentified seaside town. In truth, *Julietta* could be set anywhere or everywhere, and as with anything surrealist, trying to pin it down is to miss the point.

And that's where Wiśniewska's staging—the first in Poland since Łódź in 1978—did so well, as a freewheeling fantasy on what is itself one of opera's great fantasies. Though it was set more or less in a somewhat faded present, many of the costumes (Emil Wysocki) suggested something from a slightly more trippy recent past. The look was contemporary, with multimedia projections (Marcin Cecko) interwoven and primary colours mixed with pastels, reinforced by Aleksandr Prowaliński's lighting—all told, quite a lurid palette. Yet behind all this, the slant of the set, particularly for Julietta's house, felt perhaps like a tribute to František Muzika's celebrated design for the opera's 1938 Prague premiere. Maybe needlessly, several of the characters were renamed, though often emphasizing the nautical setting. The Little Arab (sung by the mezzo Zuzanna Nalewajek with wonderful vocal presence) became a Mermaid, a transition probably suggested by her line to Michel in the opening scene, 'I have no legs'. The trio of Three Gentlemen (Nalewajek, Dorota Dutkowska and Jadwiga Postrożna) at the start of Act 2 came on ingeniously dressed as a three-part crab; adding further to this beautiful sense of fantasy, Maćko Prusak's choreography soon filled the stage with jellyfish, starfish, clams and octopuses—leaving everyone except Michel and Julietta dressed as a sea creature. Surrealism can keep you at a distance, but this was often very moving. Straight out of the surrealist debunking playbook, the ship became a modest kayak. In place of the usual Bureau of Dreams, run by a Clerk, here a Scientist (the tenor Aleksander Zuchowicz) presided over a cave-like hospital suite full of drips—wired up to all those who came to order the content of their dreams from the Scientist. Michel got trapped here, but saw his illusory double happy with Julietta.

Opera Wrocław's music director Mirian Khukhunaishvili conducted with easy command of this challenging score to deliver a thoughtful and, well, dreamy account of the music. Matching sound to the staging, the opening was noticeably languid, yet



Agnieszka Adamczak in the title role of Barbara Wiśniewska's new staging of 'Julietta' in Wrocław

had clarity, too, and Khukhunaishvili was alert to the score's special timbres, notably the accordion and piano. The chorus also responded well to the conductor and director alike, entering into the spirit of things not least in their duck-evoking quack-quacks. Remarkably, most of the roles had been double cast and on April 17 the voices all sounded excitingly operatic in a work where casting directors sometimes take the music-theatre route. As Julietta, Agnieszka Adamczak brought a soprano layered with rich, dusky colours, embodying (in a long, flowing dress) the feminine ideal for which Michel was searching. Leonardo Sánchez's baritonal tenor gave his Michel lyric heft, and he sang with a consistently musical sense of line. The baritone Łukasz Rosiak was strong as the Memory Seller (here the Cleaner), the first of several characters to appear dressed identically to Michel. Sebastian Rutkowski sang the Old Arab (Triton) imposingly, later reappearing as one half of the old couple (identified as Old Michel and Old Julietta) and joining Jadwiga Postrożna in their wistful scene with piano accompaniment. The tenor Michał Błocki made his mark as the Postman (Commissioner in the original) bringing news from three years ago—given the collapse of postal systems in some parts of the world, now more of a reality than when the play and opera were conceived. Though sung in French, some of the spoken lines were delivered in Polish; whether or not designed to suit the mostly Polish cast, this bilingual shift proved an effective tool for moving between the work's surrealist origins and the audience's hearts.

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