

## *Santa Fe Opera 2: Captains of Industry*

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On a good night at the Santa Fe Opera the elements will conspire to add a little something extra to the performance, some well-timed lightning flashes, or a roll of thunder to underscore an ominous pause in the score. On this particular evening the vigorous breezes from a distant storm lent a certain authenticity to the chorus of buffeted sailors that opens Wagner's *Der Fliegende Holländer*; such elemental intrusions, however, were decidedly less impressive than the taut dramatic sweep of Thomas Guggeis' musical direction or the sustained intensity of the central vocal performances, either of which, on their own, would have been enough to guarantee a memorable evening.

*Der Fliegende Holländer* may be one of the world's great sea-faring operas, but the staging of David Alden dispensed quietly with the maritime setting, situating the action instead within a stylised milieu of early-twentieth-century industrial capitalism. The sailors in the first scene were kept busy in an attempt to secure a giant cog – presumably part of some larger machine – while the chorus of spinners at the beginning of the second act were transformed into factory workers dressed in goggles and protective plastic coats; the spinning wheels of their song were the valves attached to a series of giant pipes. The Dutchman himself was presented as an old-school captain of industry, a suited man at a large desk of dark, polished wood, waited on by superannuated functionaries in suits and hats of spider webs and dust; his ship was a forbidding construction of shipping containers, and his cargo of treasure lay hidden in stacks of cardboard boxes that looked more suited to paperwork than gems.

The revised setting, although visually engaging, did little to suggest any greater argument; certainly no one familiar with the opera would have come away with the kind of unexpected new insights that drastic recontextualizations can sometimes bring. Nor, however, did the staging seem overly restricted by its own concept. The series of encounters that drive the plot – Daland and the Dutchman, Erik and Senta, Senta and the



Alden, *Der Fliegende Holländer* © 2023 by Curtis Brown/Santa Fe Opera  
**Santa Fe, lunes, 31 de julio de 2023.**  
Santa Fe Opera. Wagner: *Der Fliegende Holländer*. David Alden, director. Nicholas Brownlee (Holländer), Elza van den Heever (Senta), Richard Trey Smagur (Erik), Morris Robinson (Daland), Gretchen Krupp (Mary), and Bille Bruley (Steuermann). Choir and Orchestra of the Santa Fe Opera. Thomas Guggeis, conductor

Dutchman – succeeded through a simplicity of action that allowed the story to emerge through the strength of the vocal performances, while the choral scenes that open each act, especially the synchronised dance of the factory workers in the spinning chorus, had an infectious dynamism that kept them lively and engaging.



Wagner: *Der Fliegende Holländer*. Thomas Guggeis, conductor. David Alden, director. Santa Fe Opera, July 2023. © 2023 by Curtis Brown for the Santa Fe Opera.

It was the musical performances, however, that elevated the evening. Nicholas Brownlee, the animated Kurwenal in last year's *Tristan*, provided the evening with a Dutchman of great vitality and charisma. With crisp phrasing and bright tone he began his first monologue at a respectably high level of intensity before patiently building it into the emotional summit of the first act. His other scenes were equally compelling: his courtship of Senta had a grand, urgent manner that belied the essentially domestic nature of their discussion, while his identity reveal in the third act was delivered with appropriate anguish. If his solo scenes were notable for their immediacy, he also had the agility to turn the first act duet with Daland into a credible expression of mutual good will, and enough passion to make the love duets sparkle.

Elza van den Heever was equally impressive as Senta. The projective power that made her second-act song so captivating never came at the expense of emotional nuance – the coda was especially arresting – but the strength of her performance lay in the energy she brought to the series of duets with Erik and the Dutchman in the final two acts. While she responded to Erik's vain laments with detached sympathy, her scenes with the Dutchman conveyed all the caution, disbelief and muted excitement of someone struggling with the realisation that their lifelong dreams might actually be coming true.

The central lovers may have dominated the evening, but the supporting performances were notably strong. Richard Trey Smagur captured the futility and doubt that existed just beneath the surface of Erik's demanding self-absorption; if his scene with Senta in the second act highlighted the gulf that existed between them, he approached their third act meeting with such ardour that it was impossible not to feel some sympathy for his doomed desire. Morris Robinson was an authoritative Daland whose robust tone and genial presence turned the first act negotiations with the Dutchman into one of the evening's highlights. Even the comparably small role of Mary received a solid reading from Gretchen Krupp, whose stern phrasing was the practical counterweight to Senta's dreamy yearning.

The evening's driving force, however, was Thomas Guggeis, who presided over a performance of orchestral dazzle and epic narrative sweep. From the tempestuous vigour of the overture it was apparent that Mr Guggeis had a firm grasp on the work's capacity for sonic splendour, but it was his exacting sense of pace and ability to instil nearly every passage with simmering excitability that proved the evening's greatest asset: indeed, the



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expectant tension leading from the Steersman's song into the Dutchman's arrival or the calm before the storm of Senta's song were every bit as captivating as the rousing choral scenes.

While Wagner's subsequent operas achieved a greater synthesis of mythology and drama – and often delve deeper into the intertwined nature of love and death – *Der Fliegende Holländer* offers an undemanding introduction to the themes and approaches that make the Wagnerian universe so endlessly compelling. With its compact structure and its reliance on traditional forms it comes closer to straightforward entertainment than the more complex later works; on this evening, however, the distinction of the performances placed the opera's full grandeur on prominent display.

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