

REVIEW: *THE OUTLAW AND THE KING, ACT II*

by Alan Mallach

The story of Saul and David is one of the great stories of world literature. With its king laid low by madness, his love/hate relationship with the young David, who will inherit his crown through a symbolic act of parricide, and the doomed Jonathan, torn between his love for his father and his love for David, it is a Greek tragedy, written hundreds of years earlier. No wonder, then, that it has drawn the attention of writers and composers, from Charpentier's *David and Jonathan* of 1688, Handel's *Saul* of 1738 to, most recently, *The Outlaw and the King*, by long-time Roosevelt residents composer Mark Zuckerman

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OUTLAW (CONT'D.)

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and librettist/poet David Herrstrom.

The Outlaw and the King, by Mark and David's account, has been in gestation for five years. The first act was read, in a modest performance that substituted a piano for the chamber ensemble for which the work is scored, two years ago. The second act was performed for the first time at Rutgers' Nicholas Music Center on December 1, 2008, in a concert reading with a professional cast of singers, and an ensemble of seven instrumental musicians—woodwinds, brass, harp and percussion—conducted by Andrew Cyr. It was a memorable evening.

After a first act which takes place some time earlier, and establishes the characters and their troubled connections to one another, the second act takes place in two scenes, the first on the eve of Saul's final battle against the Philistines in which both he and Jonathan were killed; and the second the following morning in David's tent after the battle. David Herrstrom's libretto takes ample liberties with the Biblical account, but retains its essence. He has added, as a foil to the insane or God-oppressed central characters, an armor-bearer named Zerubbabel. As a way of representing the presence of the divine power (called in the opera, with a not terribly sly dig at George W Bush, The Decider), Herrstrom has added a female trio, called Hannagail. Hannagail also provides a welcome counterpoint of female voices in what is otherwise an all-male vocal ensemble.

While the work is a collaboration between librettist and composer, in the end what one hears is far more the composer's than the librettist's voice. This is no reflection on Herrstrom's fine libretto, but to make clear that ultimately *The Outlaw and the King* must be judged on its musical qualities, and on the dramatic effect created by the music, rather than on its words. And let it be said, without hesitation,

that the second act of *The Outlaw and the King* is a work of great beauty.

The act opens magically, as a few whispered notes on harp and flute set the scene for Zerubbabel and Jonathan's musings on the peaceful night, and the doom that awaits them at dawn. The opera has many more fine moments, including David and Jonathan's farewell later in that scene; and in the second scene, the confrontation between David and Zerubbabel—the opera's dramatic highlight—which ends with the new king's murder of the old king's servant. Throughout these moments, Zuckerman weaves the voices of his seven singers together expertly; with only seven instruments, he creates a rich, distinctive instrumental texture, moving from lyrical woodwind lines to explosive bursts of percussion. The percussion, in particular, ably played by Peter James Saleh, was a powerful presence, constantly underlining and reinforcing the drama in different ways. *The Outlaw and the King* is not only a work of beauty, but also a work of solid craftsmanship.

At the same time, though, much as I enjoyed the musical intricacy of Zuckerman's vocal ensembles, which reflect his experience as a choral writer, I found myself thinking that—when *The Outlaw and the King* is staged, as it deserves to be—the interweaving of the voices at so many moments may well work against the dramatic impact of the opera, and render it more static on the stage than its creators would probably want it to be. I also would have liked more lyricism in the music Zuckerman has written for David, who was, after all, not just an outlaw and a king, but the psalmist, the sweet singer of Israel.

The performance was solid and full of conviction, and allowed me to get a far better sense of the merits of the opera than had been possible in the earlier reading of its first act two years ago. John-Andrew Fernandez was particularly good as Zerubbabel, while David Arnold, a seasoned bass-baritone, brought power and depth to the smaller role of Saul. Unfortunately, the two

young singers who sang the roles of David and Jonathan, while singing with conviction, had still largely unformed voices, not yet capable of the nuances and shadings that would have given more life to their characters.

No matter. I have heard worse voices at the Met. In the end, I come back to where I began. This was a memorable evening, an outstanding creative achievement by two of our Roosevelt neighbors, Mark Zuckerman and David Sten Herrstrom. A heartfelt Bravo to both, and to the Roosevelt Arts Project, which helped nurture their achievement. ■

RESCUE SQUAD NEWS

by Jack Rindt, EMT-D

The Squad has responded to 70 calls in town and out of town for the year of 2008. Our emergency calls were cardiacs, diffidently breathing, traumas, a host of medical emergencies, fire stand-bys and mutual aid calls into Millstone Twp.

The latest training that was held in November was Patient Assessment and in December the training equipment review.

November was the month that the Squad elected their new officers.

President: Neil Marko

Treasurer/Secretary: Carol Watchler

Captain: Jack Rindt

Lieutenant: Steve Yeger

Mission Statement:

The purpose of the Roosevelt First Aid Squad is to render immediate and necessary emergency care to the sick and injury regardless of nationality, race, creed, color, sex, sexual orientation or gender identity and when necessary, provide transportation to the appropriate medical facility. It is also the purpose of the Roosevelt First Aid Squad to promote safety and disseminate knowledge of emergency care methods and procedures.

We can always use more members.

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