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OPERA REVIEW

Second Life: 'Death and the Powers' from ART



James Maddalena (right, with Hal Cazalet) sings the role of Simon Powers on stage before retreating to the orchestra pit after the character enters the System. (Jonathan Williams)

By [Jeremy Eichler](#)
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Tod Machover's new sci-fi opera, "Death and the Powers," sets its gaze on subjects both ancient and ultra-modern. In the former camp is the question of whether the soul, or something beyond the body, can live after our death. In the latter camp is the question of the deeper meanings of our infatuation with technology — the way we experience our lives increasingly through its prism.

"Death and the Powers," which received its US premiere on Friday at the Cutler Majestic Theatre, imagines a mega-wealthy entrepreneur named Simon Powers who transcends his own death by uploading himself into a technology he has created called "the System." Simon's voice, his personality, even his breathing come to inhabit his physical environment — the walls and the chandelier — that surround his family's home.

For the rest of the opera, Simon's daughter, his wife, and his assistant must make sense of it all and decide whether to join him inside the System. The entire 90-minute work, an American Repertory Theater production, is framed as a performance piece by onstage robots, who present it as a kind of ritual drama passed down to them by their original human creators.

I left Friday's performance thinking of a line by the scholar Leonard Meyer, who once described what he called the most difficult problem of contemporary criticism: "to distinguish the truly original from the bizarre." This work has elements of both. Much of Machover's music, his soaring vocal writing, and especially some of his sculpted electronic soundscapes, are highly imaginative and quite compelling. Robert Pinsky's libretto is often deft, and the production, directed by Diane Paulus with choreography by Karole Armitage, is often visually stunning, especially with the digital virtuosity delivered here through technologies developed over several years at the MIT Media Lab. The custom sound system, too, is something to behold.

At the same time, the work's basic story — credited to Pinsky and Randy Weiner — is bizarre and exaggerated enough to almost completely muffle the resonance of the opera's highly emotional material. Much more energy seems to have

gone into erecting its fantastical world than building the bridges that might allow us to feel drawn into the plight of its characters, to care much about their choices.

One big challenge in this regard is that the opera's main character performs off-stage for most of the evening. Simon Powers, masterfully sung by James Maddalena, retreats to the orchestra pit after he has entered the System. To realize his nonpresent presence, Maddalena is outfitted with sensors that catch his gestures and his physiological states while singing and translate them into visual displays on three giant movable walls.

In one scene, delegates from the United Way, the United Nations, and the Administration come to demand answers from the vanished Powers. His presence in the System seems to have brought on something resembling the apocalypse. Famine engulfs the land, war has broken out, human beings are reduced to a mass of misery. There is some appealing, sharply pointed music in this scene — sung by Douglas Dodson, David Kravitz, and Tom McNichols — but the conceit itself seems almost surreally heavy-handed. Wasn't there enough to unpack in the original act of Simon's entry into the System — the main character *becoming* the scenery — without linking his choice to the collapse of the external world and, by implication, the evolution/extinction of the human race?

The daughter Miranda, beautifully sung by Sara Heaton, is the most human and grounded of all the characters, desperately missing her father but wracked by doubts about giving up her own physical body to join him. Emily Albrink sang lustrously as the wife, Evvy, at one point erotically engaged with the chandelier as her husband's proxy. Hal Cazalet showed unflagging verve as the assistant Nicholas. Gil Rose led with great focus from the pit.

So what does it all add up to? Assuming we are to see Simon Powers not as some maniac beyond our ken but as an amalgamation and intensification of impulses deeply felt in our society, the work becomes, at its most modest, a cautionary tale about the romance and mystery of living digitally beyond ourselves; or at its more stentorian, a sharp indictment of technological hubris. That trailblazing technology is itself put to the service of exploring these points is one of the work's many ironies that cumulatively leave you with plenty to think about after the robots have powered down for the night.

But would it also have been possible for this opera to delve into its fascinating themes in a way that resonated more deeply? I think so. With some substantial revisions this piece could do double-duty as a thrilling technological tour de force and as a mythically powerful chamber drama. It could hold us engaged by the drives and dilemmas of its characters, while also providing a supremely relevant 21st-century spin on age-old spiritual questions of death and the soul, one's legacy, and the place of human finitude and vulnerability in the quest for a meaningful life. That's what a team of this creative talent is capable of. Maybe it's not too late.

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