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An Unlikely Confluence of “Powers”

By Stephen Mudge

PARIS – Nestled in the side of the Monte Carlo Casino is a plaque commemorating the work of Diaghilev and the Ballets Russes In Monaco. Since that period of fertile creativity, the principality has taken a back seat in contemporary creativity. The world premiere of Tod Machover’s “Death and The Powers” in the Salle Garnier on 24 September, alongside that of an opera by René Koering, “Die Marquise von O,” could help the principality regain its reputation for artistic innovation.

Machover’s work is the product of a long-standing association between MIT, his professional home base, and Monaco’s Futurum association, to whose President, Kawther Al-Abood, the opera is dedicated. Futurum’s aim is promote futuristic art and science projects. The libretto is by American poet laureate Robert Pinsky and deals with prolonging life by technological means.

The story involves Simon Powers, a rich bully who loves power and money, who decides to dodge his own mortality by downloading the essence of his being into a computerized reality named The System. The opera deals with the effect of his decision on the Powers family.

On entering the theater, the audience is plunged into an atmosphere of menacing electronic rumblings, as “operabots” (rather endearing baby

robots) lurch into life. Questioning whether death is the equivalent of a technical malfunction they introduce the family Powers, as Simon, projected by baritone James Maddalena, is preparing to enter The System. He is assisted by Nicholas -- a role that elicited some fine tenor singing from Hal Cazalet – a young man saved from an orphanage by Simon.

Initially suspicious of her husband’s physical absence, Simon’s wife Evvy, mezzo soprano Patricia Risley, becomes intrigued by the purity of her husband’s avatar existence. A musical chandelier, operated by remote control and by the singers, becomes the obscure, almost sexual, object that is Simon’s being. Three visitors arrive from a world delegation to ask Simon to explain the instability in the markets and the death and famine that this has engendered. Simon replies with poetry and Nicholas suggests that the way forward is for the poor to enter The System – the ultimate technological solution.

It is Simon’s daughter Miranda (a name with undeniable Shakespearean implications) who brings a shining humanity to the eight scenes of this 90-minute exploration of humanoid technology, with her need to feel pain, and to stick with her body of “death and sweat.”



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When the hyperbole of Pinsky's text threatens to produce a patronizing smile, the poet gently reminds us that, behind these portentous thoughts, there is a playful wit at work, with such lines as "it's never the matter that matters."

Although a figure of post-Boulez musical abstraction, composer Machover's music never alienates the ear. His consonant vocal lines are shown to best advantage in Miranda's heart-rending lament, a crowning moment for Joëlle Harvey's soaring soprano. There are also witty ensembles for the world delegation, dominated by the powerful sonorous bass of Tom McNichols as The Administration, ably abetted by bass David Kravitz as The United Nations and high tenor Frank Kelley as The United Way.

I have only praise for the production of Diane Paulus who, like the characters of the Powers family, had the unenviable task of staging a convincing drama where the central character becomes an electronic presence. Along with the "operabots," Alex McDowell's morphing design consists of mobile electronic panels that become reflections of Simon's being, changing subtly in color and movement, controlled by electronic sensors and analysis software.

Gil Rose conducted a chamber ensemble of the Boston Modern Orchestra Project that meshed seamlessly with the electronics, controlled by a dedicated group of students from the MIT Media Lab.