

Chicago Stage Style

April 2011 Review by David Zak

Death and the Powers



Fans of contemporary opera will be thrilled by the Chicago premiere of Tod Machover's "Death and the Powers". As directed by Diane Paulus, this start to Chicago Opera Theater's 2011 Season is visually stunning, emotionally evocative, and a musical powerhouse.

Working with a libretto by Robert Pinsky from a story by Pinsky and Randy Weiner, "Death and the Powers" is based on an intriguing premise: if you are rich beyond comprehension, yet at the end of your life, what can be done to sustain your existence? Baritone James Maddalena plays Simon Powers, whose wife Evvy, daughter Miranda, and research assistant and adopted son Nick have gathered to watch as he transitions from his human existence to a new computerized version of his life called The System.



Maddalena rages powerfully in the opening sequence when he takes leave of his family. Eventually, Evvy and Miranda, who have wonderful arias of loss and love, join him in his computerized world. Ultimately, Powers turns away from humanity, rebuffing efforts from a trio of officials who hope to avoid financial chaos that is being triggered by his departure. The drama is book ended by vignettes in which a fantastic team of robots share their confusion about human emotions like grief with the audience.

Sopranos Emily Albrink (as Evvy) and Sara Heaton (Miranda) are excellent. I found Evvy's wordless aria while she wore a headset to speak with her husband after he had entered The Sytem particularly moving. Hal Cazalet has a fantastic, triumphant tenor as Nick, but I felt the physical movement incorporating his mechanical arm was not full developed by Paulus or her movement team. As Simon, Maddalena is a great force of a man confronting his own mortality in the opening sequence. Unfortunately he spends the majority of the piece singing off stage, and I missed his presence.



In one of the most memorable sequences, Miranda is overcome by a mob of the homeless and starving, an exciting dance that is terrifying and powerful, and is choreographer Karole Armitage's most fully realized work.

The true star of the piece is the technical crew. Production designer Alex McDowell has crafted three high-tech periaktoi which are used to great effect for projections, lighting, and scrolling electronic headlines in a never ending variety of patterns. Lighting designer Don Holder has some great sequences as

each of the characters cross into the world of light, accompanied by walls of music from the excellent orchestra conducted by Gil Rose, supplemented by the sound design of Chris Full. What many people will remember are the great family of robots who eloquently communicate through light and articulated movement. They are a master of technology, and just one sample of how this technologically brilliant piece creates moment after moment of vivid stagecraft.

Of special interest to those who love the technology is a free 'Behind the Technology' session to be held on April 4 at 6 pm on the stage of the Harris Theater with composer Machover and his technical crew. To reserve tickets to this free event, or to purchase tickets call 312 704 8414. Tickets can also be purchased at ChicagoOperaTheater.org or HarrisTheaterChicago.org. Chicago Opera Theater's 2011 Season continues on May 7 and 8 with "Medea" by Marc-Antoine Charpentier, followed by "He/She," a repertory presentation of Schumann's "Frauenliebe und Leben" and Janacek's "The Diary of One Who Disappeared". For more information on this show, please visit the Theatre In Chicago [Death and the Powers](#) page.

