

# PERFORMANCE reviews

staged at the

## FROM THE HOUSE OF THE DEAD

by Daniel Felsenfeld  
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The prevailing critical view of operatic culture is that when the best-heeled New Yorkers go to their most vaunted – to a fault – opera house, they want to be transported, to have eyes full of beauty and ears charting a chase of the sublime. Sure, they like tragedy, but they like it festooned with glittering high notes and cocktails between acts, dinner after.

Sometimes, however, this is just plain not true.

Take the *overwhelming* success of Patrice Chéreau's stark production of Leos Janacek's (underutilized) opera – a setting of Dostoyevsky's novelization of a Siberian prison, unmatched in the repertoire for an overall grey-hued *mise en scène* (even *Lulu* feels like a wheel of colors by comparison), with a libretto by the composer and which first premiered in 1930, two years after his passing. From the opening darkness rent only by the lighting of a single match (shades of Ian McKellan's *Richard III* in London two decades ago, which commenced the same way), *From the House*

*of the Dead*, an opera never before staged at the Met, was a bona-fide hit. Tickets were at a premium to watch an ensemble of men, none of them opera superstars, endure the grit and fear of state-imposed exile in an etiolated spiritual wasteland, with little narrative to speak of, characters difficult to distinguish from one another, and not one crushing soprano aria to be found. I feared half-empty houses and critical vivisections in both the papers and the demanding blogosphere, but on the final night of this unilaterally lauded production, a well-deserved standing ovation resounded at the full-to-capacity opera house. I could not have been more wrong.

Making an opera comprised almost entirely of male voices (excepting a few soprano prostitutes) is a daring and difficult mission – it works very well for *Billy Budd*, less well for *Gatsby*, and few other examples. Janacek, being the *echt-modernist* he was (or hell, even *post-modernist*) is able to overcome this aesthetic obstacle with his usual triumph, which works for several reasons.

For one, his vocal writing is, as always, masterly in that he aims obsessively to build music that mimics speech patterns down to their fleetest nuance. A true performance of his stage works

in their intended language features singing that lies somewhere between opera and *Sprechstimme*. But it is in his orchestral writing that his true genius lays, creating an orchestra that churns and burbles beneath the quasi-cantellation, not merely an accompanying force to buoy up the vocal lines but more like a Greek Chorus able to comment simultaneously.

The evening's real star was not a singer (this is an ensemble show; nobody *ought* to stand out, it would defeat one of the main points) not Richard Perduzzi's haunting and large set, not Chéreau's staging but the former *wunderkind* and constant presence on the world stage conductor (and, for the record, composer) Essa-Pekka Salonen, whose debut at the Met is indeed long overdue. From the opening moments to the final blows – 90 intermission-free minutes later – Salonen was uncannily in charge, pacing this grim show with extraordinary urgency, drawing the necessary quotes around the title's word "dead" because these souls in prison are anything but. The orchestra, one of the best in the world, has seldom sounded finer. And with no lead character to follow, no arias to repeat, and no plot to communicate, Salonen gave the audience a lucid and brilliant introduction to the evening's secret hero: the composer. Hopefully mine is not the only imagination positing



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Salonen's *Pelléas*, *Rake's Progress*, *Peter Grimes*, *Wozzeck*, *Le Grand Macabre*, etc. at the Met.

Janacek's libretto for *From the House of the Dead* plays like a contemporary reality show: this is not a story about people but about a situation. These dead souls tell stories (arias being the precursor to "talking head" moments) to which one is never sure who is listening, or if anyone is listening at all – for example, one inmate regaled his cell, choc full of prisoners, with stories of his former life. Nobody looked in his direction, nobody moved, nobody was in a position to hear him – and yet, he kept on talking. This is pure Dostoyevsky, at least in spirit: any reader of his novels, stories, and especially his *A Writer's Diary*, knows him to be as much the accomplished fantasist of the brutally dispossessed as needle-eyed chronicler of the same, charting with blood-chilling realism man's capabilities for violence, cruelty, suffering, ennui, hysterics, desperation and murder. His observations about the dark side of humanity gave what teems beneath society's rocks a loud and often hysterical voice, and Janacek the composer – forever a precursor to so much part-and-parcel of modernism – follows him fearlessly into the dark.

If there was one problem with the production it was in the cluttered nature of Chéreau's staging.

It was not without brilliance – detritus crashed to the floor from the rafters which all onstage were forced to sweep up; a crush of nude and ravaged men appeared out of a stage left mist; a tenor (the astounding Eric Stoklossa) turned a traditional alto role into a campy-but-devastating drag turn – but, even for an opera in which clumping up and meandering is *de rigueur*, it tended to lack focus, and not in that experimental regitheatre sort of way. As lofty and foreboding as *From the House of the Dead* was as a piece of stagecraft, it led me to wonder what a baby-with-the-bathwater politically minded staging of a Peter Sellars might look like (Guantanamo Bay?), or, more to the point, a direct and über-violent/sexualized realization of Christopher Alden, whose *Don Giovanni* across the pavement at City Opera was, to me, the triumph of the season. And while it seems a kind of golden rule at the Met to overstuff the stage with as many souls as possible to give the impression of maximum spectacle, this herding weakened the impact of an already-confusing piece. The lone set, which had a kind of lofty grandeur like a granulated blowup Xerox of a Chirico painting, while gorgeous, did not need to be filled to make its point – in fact, a little more dead space might have been appropriate.

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