

The Sun Runner at Toronto Free Theatre

A (hopeful) voyage down to the bottom of death

PAUL PIVATO

The Sun Runner, by Kenneth Dyba, is a play about death. Essentially, it is the story of Harriet, a woman dying of cancer who must come to terms not only with death, but also with the ghosts of her past that continue to reach out from the grave. Suppressed by society, death is

brought into full view and tenderly explored in *The Sun Runner*. Death acts as a catalyst in the lives of all the characters.

Harriet, played convincingly by Joy Coghill, is bed-ridden in a hospital, where she reminisces about her childhood days. Harriet's father, who she affectionately calls "Beetle

Dad", showers the girl with love and fascinates her with thrilling stories. After Beetle Dad dies in the war, he becomes an obsession with Harriet, the deified hero of an almost perverse worship. Lying in her hospital bed, Harriet dons the "bomber-flaps" headpiece that her father wore as a pilot, or "sun runner". She then announces that she wants to wear the "bomber flaps" in her coffin.

One of the people Harriet meets in the hospital is "Motor Mouth" Mary (Martha Cronyn), a cancer victim in awe of Terry Fox, whose Marathon of Hope serves as a backdrop to the

ongoing story of Harriet and her family. Harriet is disgusted by Fox—"displaying his dying for the whole world to gawk at. Dying is private." For Harriet, death is too ugly to be shared with others. Harriet equates

Fox with the Dionne quintuplets, who she remembers seeing as a child—"trapped baby dolls" on display before a gaping public. However, much of the dialogue which takes place at the hospital contributes nothing, dulling the pace and tension of the play; it could have been easily pruned.

As the play unfolds, Harriet's past life is revealed. Her marriage to Allen, subtly acted by Barrie Baldaro, begins to deteriorate after their first child, who is born

deformed. Harriet's obsession with Beetle Dad, grows and dominates her, making Allen furious with jealousy. Death has already entered their life. However the audience can never clearly understand Harriet's idolization of her dead father, which borders on the psychotic.

The Sun Runner never evades the grim side of death, yet at the same time it portrays the love and awareness which death can evoke, doing so in a series of touching vignettes that swing from the past to the present. Despite its theme, *The Sun Runner*, is ultimately an uplifting play, the dramatic struggle of how a dying woman and her family must meet and overcome death; a shockingly real love story ringing with hope.

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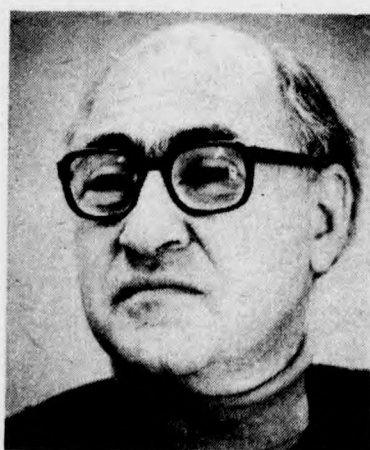


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U of T twin-bill opera breaks tradition skillfully

DONALD M. SOLITAR

The standard double bill of one-act operas is provided by the "Cav & Pag twins", i.e., *Cavaleria Rusticana* and *Pagliacci* which were written within two years of one another, and are both prime examples of "verismo". On Saturday night, 5 March, 1983 the Opera Division of the Faculty of Music at U of T broke this tradition and presented *Dido & Aeneas* and *L'Heure Espagnole*, two operas written over 200 years apart, and which could not be more different in mood, idiom, or style. Yet they shared excellent performance.

Henry Purcell performed *Dido & Aeneas* for the first time in 1689, at a boarding school for girls in Chelsea, England. This accounts for the fact that the cast is, with the one exception of Aeneas, comprised of women, some of whom played the trouser roles of sailors. The story of Dido and Aeneas was familiar to Purcell's audience from Virgil's *Aeneid*, and so the opera starts "in media res" (right in the middle of things). After an opening dance hinting at the coming tragedy, Dido (Martha Collins, a most regal queen) complains of unease from her love for Aeneas to Belinda (Sung Ha Shin, of gorgeous tone), her lady-in-waiting, who tries to cheer her up by assuring her that Aeneas indeed loves Dido. Aeneas (Peter Barnes, a brawny baritone) arrives to confirm this. We are then transported to a dark cave (the scenic effects were marvelous) in which a Sorceress (Betty Haberl, a malicious Mezzo), two sister witches, and assorted demons plot the downfall of Dido by falsely informing Aeneas in the form of Jove's messenger Mercury that he must "hit the road to Rome". Aeneas falls for the trick (his beauty did outweigh his brains) and announces his imminent departure. The perennial sailor "love 'em and leave 'em" sentiments are expressed in a sailors' chorus including "And silence their mourning with vows of returning, But never intending to visit them more". Dido, destroyed by the ease with which Aeneas would

abandon her, sings one of the most famous and lovely arias of all times, "When I am laid in earth", and in a funeral procession goes to her death.

The performance was extremely moving, with special beauty provided by the well-sung chorus and the "baroque" orchestra with fine harpsichord realization. The settings while using minimal material, were very effective and exciting. (Unfortunately, to allow change of scenery without lowering the curtain, a skim screen was used for projections. This negates part of the feeling of a live performance, especially when the skim had a large, obviously repaired tear which framed some of the stage.)

L'Heure Espagnole is the amusing tale of a young wife (played voluptuously by Joanne Kolomyjec) who spends one afternoon at home in her elderly husband's clock repair shop entertaining two would-be lovers, and one truly successful one. The doddering husband (a well-done imitation by the youthful Lenard Whiting) is oblivious to his wife's many charms, but a poet, more in love with his own versifying than with his causes (played by a funny Daniel Stainton), a banker whose stomach is larger than his eyes (Ron Haney, actually a graduate, provides a properly stuffy performance), and a virile, brawny muleteer (David Budgell, sufficiently naive) are chosen in succession in a self-service manner to fill the wife's loveless afternoon. There is great comic action with two grandfather's clocks serving as hiding place.

Ravel's famous expertise in the use of orchestral colour, and his pseudo-Spanish melodies and rhythms provided in style by the orchestra, made the hour seem more like 60 seconds.

Though the second opera was not technically sung as well as the first, the fun and good spirit of it more than compensated. To paraphrase a motto of Boccaccio used *L'Heure Espagnole*:

In love, and in Opera, performance is what really counts.

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