

Thoughtful post-nuke film

Testament
Towne Cinema

Review by George Scott

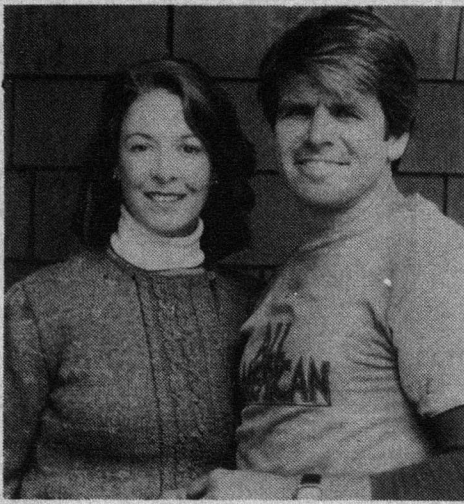
In the event of nuclear warfare North America will meet a brutally abrupt end. Movies generally approach this idea by attempting to scare the wits into us with special effects as in *The Day After*. "Nuclear war is not nice and should be avoided," we repeat to ourselves each time the idea comes to mind. *Testament*, a serious drama, focuses upon the Wetherly family after the bombs have dropped.

Lynne Littman, *Testaments* director and co-producer, has produced for \$750,000 an impeccably well crafted film. Littman observes that "men seem to get involved in debating the logistics of nuclear warfare." She is absolutely correct. Nuclear war is a matter of economic, political and military policy. As such it is entirely conceivable and primarily a male pursuit. *Testament* intends to affect planning for nuclear war by alerting us to its emotional consequences. If you find that idea laughable, avoid the movie, you cannot logically benefit from it.

Fortunately for *Testament*, it is acted as well as it is directed. No performance is less than serviceable. Jane Alexander, who plays Carol Wetherly, the family's mother, does an admirable job in the tradition of Jane Wyman and Claudette Colbert. Consider the possibility of being with your child as radiation poisoning causes him to bleed from the intestines. Jane Alexander can show you and help you understand how it might feel.

It is unfortunate that we need these proddings from the movies as incentive to think and act effectively. Often our aroused emotions are accompanied by the palpably shoddy thinking which accomplishes little more than to make it difficult for Pentagon officials to declare us as possible winners.

My cynical observation is countered, I think, by the fact that in the world of shoddy thinking, Dirty Harry films are often



well attended. Inough we can't pretend that world war three will be prevented at the box office, we can orientate our emotions properly.

A large part of nuclear brinksmanship is to believe that death is preferable to defeat. *Testament* has, in an oblique fashion, something to say about that proposition and those who promote it.

Op somewhat uninspired

Norma
Edmonton Opera
Jubilee Auditorium
Jan. 14, 19 and 21

Review by Stuart Lemoine

On Saturday night, the Edmonton Opera gave the first of three scheduled performances of Bellini's *Norma*. The production is not exactly a failure but there were some major disappointments. I had expected more from director Fabrizio Melano, who did an excellent *Traviata* here last season, and I certainly expected more of soprano Olivia Stapp who proclaims herself to be "the new Callas."

Norma is set in Gaul, during the Roman occupation. The title character is a Druid priestess who has forsaken her vows of chastity and borne two children to the Roman pro-consul, Pollione (Ruggiero Bondino). When he deserts her for another girl, the vestal virgin Adalgisa (Judith Forst), Norma is furious. Ultimately, however, she forgives everyone and mounts a funeral pyre to atone for her sin. Moved by this, Pollione joins her. Adalgisa remains a virgin.

Is this credible? It's hard to say what's credible where Druids are concerned, but Bellini's music is wonderfully persuasive. The sheer melodiousness of the work is such that one can be completely engaged by it and appreciate the passions of the characters even though the characters themselves are not realistically drawn.

The title role is particularly notable for its emotional compass and this is where Olivia Stapp ran into problems. Whenever Norma had to display tenderness, generosity, or concern, Stapp was terrific. All the intimate scenes were gorgeously sung and compellingly acted. But when called upon to make Norma's frequent outsize pronouncements of fury, scorn, and vengeance, the soprano simply fell apart. In these sections, Bellini tests his singer with florid vocal writing and extremes of vocal range. Stapp responded with labored coloratura and an empty lower register. As a result, the character projected little

authority. At some points she seemed to be withdrawing into herself - having called the Druids to war, she inexplicably hid her face in the folds of her garment like an uncommunicative child. I was impressed and almost moved by her poised singing in the long finale. I was also impressed by the extravagant arm gestures she employed in her curtain call.

Ruggiero Bondino's Pollione was solidly sung. His voice is evenly produced and quite vibrant. As an actor, he hardly moved at all, but he did stand with conviction. This proved something of a relief in his Act I duet with Adalgisa, for here Judith Forst went twirling and swooping about the stage as though dancing *Ciselle*. Her singing, however, was the best of the evening - richly projected, technically assured, with an individual, luscious, smoky sound. She was sensational.

Imre Pallo's conducting was usually sensitive but the battle cry chorus in the last act was taken so fast that it sounded trivial. This may have had something to do with the weak singing of the chorus. Strident individual voices asserted themselves too often.

Melano's direction was ordinary. His most notable innovation was a human sacrifice, performed in the middle of Norma's first act cabaletta. She didn't notice. Neither did the chorus, and the unfortunate victim was left onstage throughout the ensuing love duet - a really pointless distraction. Phil Silver's sets are impressive - sort of Stonehenge with curtains, but it seemed unlikely that Norma's "secret dwelling" would be made of monolithic slabs.

In all this was a competent performance, but one which suffered from the directorial complacency so common in Edmonton Opera's productions. *Norma* is worth hearing for Forst, for Bondino, and even for Stapp who sets a very high standard in those parts of the role which she can manage. I certainly look forward to hearing her again, but in a role which does not tax her beyond the limit of her abilities.

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