

BOOK REVIEW: Mad Scenes and Exit Arias: The Death of the New York City Opera and the Future of Opera in America by Heidi Waleson

If you love opera or, like me, are enthralled by the dramatic and often explosive turmoil experienced by not-for-profit music, theatre and opera organizations in the 20th century — especially those based in New York City — then Heidi Waleson’s “Mad Scenes and Exit Arias” is a must-read book. Her delicious research and impressive analytical insight into New York City Opera’s (NYCO) 70 years of opera-making is thrilling and, at times, unbelievable and even heartbreaking. Ms. Waleson has filled her pages with larger than life personalities and opera leaders, including Julius Rudel, Beverly Sills, and Paul Kellogg. She has spotlighted many great artists that were discovered, nurtured and made into stars by New York City Opera in its seven decades of both impact and struggle that defined the company before it declared bankruptcy in 2013. The author tells an arts adventure story worth reading and reveals not only many of the inner workings of an exceptional American arts organization but also offers clear warnings and conclusions about the fate of opera in the United States at the beginning of the 21st century.

Envisioned as an exciting alternative to the well-established and generously-supported Metropolitan Opera, City Opera was intended by its visionary founders to be the “people’s opera.” From its modest beginnings it created work of scope and ambition that far outweighed its financial and human resources. Part of its relentless charm was the astonishing quality of its artists and productions given the company’s modest size and fragility. In spite of its beginnings, City Opera enjoyed many triumphs as well as nail-biting financial cliffs and deep management abysses.

I have never before had the pleasure of reading a book about a single arts organization that includes as many nuanced descriptions of artistic and financial details as “Mad Scenes” — with the exception of several books written by company founders. But rather than telling one individual’s story from a single perspective, as is often the case with founders’ accounts, Ms. Waleson gives us City Opera’s story from the multiple viewpoints of its various and diverse leaders, artists, stakeholders and champions — past and present.

Founded at City Center in 1943 where the rent was \$1 a year and the city paid for utilities, when NYCO moved to Lincoln Center, the still young and small opera company was expected to pay rent as a share of the actual costs of running the New York State Theatre, a venue designed as a home for the New York City Ballet and not acoustically equipped to support a contemporary opera company. From the start City Opera was seen as the step child of Lincoln Center and in many ways it was an identity it fought until the end. In retrospect, the move uptown set the company up for a financial and programming model that it could never fully embrace. The transition to an address on the upper West Side also threatened the values and the company’s mission — to be an accessible, high-quality alternative to traditional opera and to support the continued growth and artistic excellence of contemporary American opera voices.

Ms. Waleson amplifies in her book that City Opera’s existence, failure and rebirth prompts profound questions about not-for-profit performing arts organizations in the United States today. Can a traditional European art form successfully transition to producing by and with primarily American artists, stories, leaders, and funding models? Is it possible for two major opera companies to survive in one city — even if that city is New York? How does a company’s board and executive leadership align a “people’s opera” with an inherently expensive art form? Can a popular performing arts organization brand itself around an experience that continues to be supported and enjoyed by relatively few elite patrons? In

the life cycle of a not-for-profit arts organization are business decisions sometimes made from which the organization can never fully recover? Did New York City Opera ever have a chance of long-term survival when it moved from City Center to Lincoln Center and took up residence next to its competitor, the Metropolitan Opera?

Broadway has certainly made strides to evolve commercial musicals with the introduction of rock and rap music with some success in the late 20th and early 21st centuries. Similarly, NYCO was the first American opera company to produce an entire season of American operas, including a 1958 world premiere supported by W. McNeil Lowry and the Ford Foundation. But reviews for the new operas at NYCO and at a handful of other opera companies devoted to new work, have always been mixed and ticket sales and audience responses varied greatly from opera to opera, and season to season. Ms. Waleson makes painfully clear American opera in 2020 remains a niche that is celebrated and enjoyed by too few Americans.

Told in chronological order, the book offers a decade to decade account of how NYCO endured periodic orchestra strikes, audience apathy, critical dislike, a ravaging fire, ego-driven leadership and poor governance. It was a survivor until the accumulation of poor decisions, changing audience interests, competition, rising expenses and bad luck became insurmountable. In the end, the opera lost its fight for relevance. But, ironically, NYCO's demise also made room for its own odd rebirth, and for new generations of artists and arts administrators to try again to move opera into the mainstream of contemporary music and performance.

"Mad Scenes and Exit Arias" belongs at the top of every arts administration student's reading list, and on the book shelf of every arts leader looking for an enjoyable read and a thought-provoking historical perspective about the past, present and future of contemporary opera in America.

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