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 SANCTUARY SONG MAKES MUSIC
 /// JON KAPLAN ///
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SANCTUARY SONG, AN OPERA FOR KIDS

SANCTUARY SONG by Marjorie Chan and Abigail Richardson, directed by Lynda Hill, conducted by Wayne Strongman (Tapestry New Opera Works/Theatre Direct Canada). At Berkeley Street Theatre (26 Berkeley). To June 14. \$15-\$25. 416-872-1111. Rating: **NNNN**

They say an elephant never forgets, and I'll bet that any child you take to the new family opera **Sanctuary Song** won't soon forget the strong production.

An opera for kids? Sure, with an easy-to-follow but still suggestive book by **Marjorie Chan**, an imaginative score by **Abigail Richardson** and several sharply etched characters. There's even a lesson -- buried in the narrative -- about the importance of trust and friendship.

At its centre is Sydney (soprano **Xin Wang**), a female elephant being taken by her keeper James (baritone **Alvin Crawford**) from a Louisiana zoo to an animal sanctuary in Tennessee. Along the way, she recalls the major events in her life, including happy days in the Indonesian jungle with her elephant friend Penny (actor **Sharmila Dey**), capture by a hunter (actor **Frank Cox-O'Connell**), stress as a circus performer and the accident that brought her to the zoo.

Why is it sung? Music adds a richness that words alone can't communicate. There's one fine moment near the middle of the piece, when the distrustful Sydney and the stymied James first meet and seem to have nothing to share with each other. They finally make tentative moves toward understanding each other not by speaking but by singing; music becomes their common language.

One thing you won't see are baggy elephant costumes. **Kelly Wolf's** design evokes the animal qualities of Sydney and Penny, and **Viv Moore's** impressive movement work neatly conjures up the playful pachyderm pals with a swaying, hip-based walk and a use of the right arm to approximate a trunk. She's even included easily understood gestures that suggest an elephant sign-language.

Luisa Quintavalle's videos, projected on a round disc hanging above the stage and on the floor, tantalize us with close-ups of an elephant's hide and the mysteries of the jungle. **Andrea Lundy's** lighting sets up mood and helps moves us from one locale to another.

The cast is fine under **Lynda Hill's** direction, with the expressive Wang communicating Sydney's subtle emotional shifts with quiet power. **Wayne Strongman** conducts musicians **Michael Schulte**, **Lizzie Lavado** and **Ryan Scott** with the proper light touch.

I wish, though, that Hill had made more use of the lengths of chain that form much of the set. The chain suggests Sydney's various imprisonments and her jungle homeland, but the links aren't as clear as they might be.

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