

THE GLOBE AND MAIL

[ARTS](#)**The postman delivers lessons in social climbing ★★★★★**

New opera offers a timely message about living beyond one's means

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From Saturday's Globe and Mail, Wednesday, Jun. 03, 2009 03:58AM EDT

The Shadow

Tapestry New Opera

At Berkeley Street Theatre

in Toronto on Thursday

The recession has done no harm to debt collectors, whose booming business gives an unforeseen timeliness to *The Shadow*, the new opera by composer Omar Daniel and librettist Alex Poch-Goldin. This engrossing 90-minute piece, which was performed for the first time on Thursday, tells the story of a postman who borrows too much money in order to deceive and impress a bored upper-class woman he meets on his route. The title is based on a practice once common in Barcelona, where debtors would be followed by a well-dressed "shadow" whose job it was to shame the deadbeat into paying up. If you're running a major

corporation that's deep in debt, you know this spectre as a "business journalist."

The action takes place about 100 years ago, within a set (designed by Camellia Koo) based on a porticoed walkway at Barcelona's Park Guell, topped by a skyline silhouette of Antoni Gaudi's other buildings in that city. This clever construction was scarcely more vivid than the social architecture that kept the postman Raoul (baritone Peter McGillivray) so far below Allegra (soprano Carla Huhtanen) that she could see nothing of him but his uniform.

The characters were drawn thinly at the start, as in an old comedy. A hackneyed celebration of spring turned deliberately farcical when the waiter (tenor Keith Klassen) decided to hog the stage and address the audience directly. Raoul's solution for the problem of how to make Allegra notice him has many antecedents in comedy, and even when things turned bad for him, it would have been easy for Poch-Goldin, Daniel and director Tom Diamond to provide a tidy unmasking and nuptial happy ending. But their ultimate interest lay in Raoul's relationship with the Shadow (countertenor Scott Belluz), who, when he finally appeared, brought in an oppressive notion of self-mortification from Jungian psychology.

Daniel's music for his seven-person band (clarinet, trumpet, violin, cello, keyboards and percussion, conducted by Wayne Strongman) generally had a spiky, percussive character, which threw his less frequent lyrical writing into sharp relief. He would often establish a bright little cell of material and then repeat it, sometimes through an entire scene.

I found his depiction in music of individuals less compelling than his characterization of instruments, especially the cello, which became the lyrical heart of the ensemble. At key moments, Daniel's elaborate percolations would settle down into a sparse two-part melody for violin and cello, almost medieval in its simplicity. The most touching thing in the whole opera was Allegra's final disappointed song about love, a plain halting air sung over a minimal trio of strings and organ.

McGillivray's Raoul started small and grew into a squirmingly full portrait of a thwarted, self-loathing man. His make-believe (as the bold, prosperous Hernando) actually brought him closer to his truth, while the vain and vulnerable Allegra (vividly played by Huhtanen) learned only a new lesson in sorrow.

Baritone Theodore Baerg played Allegra's pompous father as a personification of society as defined by degrees of wealth. His one scene with Raoul was suggestively lit by Robert Thomson through the slats of a *jalousie*, and scored by Daniel with staid organ and wheedling violin. The one big hole in the plot was the idea that such a father would ever let his daughter go off alone with an unknown man, and the one missed opportunity was for a scene for him with Hernando.

Belluz played the Shadow as an imperious, slightly campy character. He was the guy who crashed the party with the ugly truth, and had a great time doing it. So did all of us, watching him.

The Shadow continues at Berkeley Street Theatre through May 30.

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