

The Shadow Omar Daniel

Libretto: Alex Poch-Goldin

TAPESTRY THEATRE TORONTO

REVIEWED BY WAYNE GOODING

PHOTOGRAPHY MICHAEL COOPER, COOPERSHOOTS

TORONTO-BASED TAPESTRY HAS A UNIQUE PROGRAMME THAT BRINGS COMPOSERS AND LIBRETTISTS TOGETHER IN A START-FROM-SCRATCH OPERA BOOT CAMP OF INTENSIVE CREATIVE WORKSHOPS.

The most-promising results take life on stage in five-minute scenes in the company's annual *Opera Briefs* presentation, and the best are then developed into chamber pieces of about 15-minutes each for public performance in *Opera to Go*. Over the years, a few of these have gone on to full-scale development. The latest, by composer Omar Daniel and librettist Alex Poch-Goldin, is *The Shadow*, which made an intriguing, darkly humorous and dramatically arresting entry at its world premiere.

This is not an operatic take on the familiar pulp hero famously voiced on radio by Orson Welles. The setting is old Barcelona, where there's a tradition of hiring elegantly and expensively dressed collection agents to shadow debtors and publically humiliate them until the debts are repaid. In Poch-Goldin's tightly crafted libretto – a deliciously deft operatic debut for the actor-writer – a postman, Raoul, borrows heavily to woo Allegra. It's not actually the humble Raoul who's doing the wooing, but the supposedly rich Hernando, an alter ego created by the postman, who has set out to answer some fatally revealing questions: 'Who would I be with her heart tied to mine? How would it feel if I changed my life?'

When things go comically awry on the financial front, Raoul/Hernando can't shake the debtor's Shadow. Even after a couple of murders to set matters right, Raoul loses Allegra and is left sitting helpless, face to face with the Shadow that will never go away.

We're in absurdist territory in this opera, or at least in a Jungian world of dark impulses and imaginings, where the private inner world of the protagonists breaks through the public masks. Jung talks of 'a shadow side...consisting not just of little weaknesses and foibles, but of a positively demonic dynamism'. The opera impressively exemplifies the same dualism; for all the playfulness and farce that animates *The Shadow* in its external storyline, its comic evocation of the dark side leaves you with the disquieting sense that you're in a room full of dirty little secrets – and wondering whether you've let any of your own slip out.

Director Tom Diamond's nuanced and witty direction plays on the Everyman aspect of the piece by using the auditorium aisles as part of the stage, fully engaging the audience in an already intimate Berkeley Street Theatre into the action. He's also encouraged the singers to make lots of direct, almost knowing, eye contact with the audience. Camellia Koo's simple but highly functional backdrop, an arched wall with an impressionistic cityscape carved out along the top, allows full use of the stage's small revolve, so scenes can be set with just a few props to sug-



gest the shifting locations, indoors and out. The backdrop and floor have a crazy paving pattern, which, with Robert Thomson's carefully cued lighting design, heightens the sense that all is unfolding in a psychological rather than a physical space.

Among a very fine ensemble of singers, pride of place must go to baritone Peter McGillivray in the central character of Raoul/Hernando. His role bears the biggest burden, and McGillivray negotiated the difficult and taxing score with great musical skill and all the dramatic chops to create a strong, pivotal character. Countertenor Scott Belluz, resplendent in a long, pleated topcoat and dark glasses, threw himself with evident relish into the diabolical title role, for which composer Daniel made full use of a high singing voice and lower speaking voice to create the otherworldly presence the Shadow needs to be. Soprano Carla Huhtanen created a winsomely lovelorn Allegra, a powerful and eloquent presence in an otherwise all-male ensemble, while the not-inconsiderable supporting roles of the money-lender and the waiter (a kind of *Fawlty Towers* Manuel in musical overdrive) were vividly handled by, respectively, baritone Theodore Baerg and tenor Keith Klassen.

This is first and foremost an ensemble piece, and it's for the excellence of this that the singers and the seven-piece orchestral ensemble conducted by Tapestry managing artistic director Wayne Strongman deserve the greatest kudos. Daniel and Poch-Goldin have fashioned a splendidly theatrical piece. It and this premiere staging show Tapestry's work of creating and developing new works at its best.

FIRST PRODUCTION RUN

Berkeley Street Theatre 21 to 30 May 2009

ABOVE: CARLA HUHTANEN AS ALLEGRA