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Simply divine

BY BRADLEY BAMBARGER

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In satirizing a huckster preacher in his 1927 novel "Elmer Gantry," Sinclair Lewis also tweaked the con's quarry -- those so eager to believe in something that they would fall for anything.

Composer Robert Aldridge and librettist Herschel Garfein are more generous in their new opera of "Elmer Gantry" -- and shrewder, as a piece lampooning religion probably wouldn't go over well in a greater America touchy about faith.

Rarely is choosing the middle of the road the most inspired way to go, but "Elmer Gantry" the opera straddles satire and sentiment -- as well as the genres of opera and musical theater -- with a warmth and thoughtfulness that carries one along. Particularly as the area premiere Wednesday at Montclair State University's Kasser Theater was staged with a vividness to rival big-city productions.

"Elmer Gantry" debuted in November at Nashville Opera, which co-produced the staging with Peak Performances at Montclair State. If success in a Bible Belt town was a test of the work's wider appeal, the four-show, sold-out run at the 500-seat Kasser is a testament to the university's resources and commitment. The sets were produced in the school's workshop, and the cast, orchestra and chorus feature professionals mixing with faculty and students.

Aldridge, who is director of the university's music school, hasn't written what many would hear as a forward-minded work -- the music sounds more mid-20th century than early 21st. But his achievement is exactly where Richard Danielpour failed with his recent "Margaret Garner," an opera on another deeply American source, Toni Morrison's novel "Beloved." Aldridge's score brims with idiomatic treatments of American vernacular music; moreover, his music doesn't sell the drama short.

Aldridge is the son of a North Carolina minister, a musical one, at that; so the composer has the sound of the "Elmer Gantry" milieu in his fingers. His original gospel numbers ring true, echoing old hymns even as they have harmonies richer than the genuine article. The composer's admiration of Gershwin's "Porgy and Bess" also comes through in vocal writing that's open-hearted but never cloying.

One of the deftest scenes comes when the tale's revival-tent Joan of Arc, Sharon Falconer, rebuffs Gantry's amorous overtures, half-comically; gradually, as she succumbs, the scene transforms into a powerfully romantic tour-de-force, the music's troubled lyricism underpinning the notion that love in the hereafter isn't enough for even the most saintly characters.

Along with more vocal counterpoint than one would hear on Broadway, what makes "Elmer Gantry" more opera than musical theater is the dynamism of Aldridge's instrumental writing. The orchestra embroiders with hooks to rival the sung melodies -- trumpets pealing like a bright Sunday morning, a harp that tolls like a heartbeat under a romantic aria.

Garfein's libretto manages to balance wit and sentiment as it moves with cinematic fluidity, without a single scene that drags (rare in any opera). The performers suit the opera as if the parts were written with them in mind rather than those of the book. The entire cast

-- the principals the same as in Nashville, except for the all-student performance tonight -- sings with character rather than just as characters who sing.

Keith Phares, as Gantry, has the confidence of someone who has been told he was good-looking since he was a baby, and the singer was blessed with an almost unctuously seductive baritone. He embodied the shallow jock turned sham artist. The willowy Jennifer Rivera -- as Falconer, all ironed-straight blond hair and virginal white robes -- has more formal voice, but her stagy diction suits the part to a T.

Tenor William Ferguson played the role of Gantry's level-headed, good-hearted school friend, Frank, with gestural subtlety throughout the night, playing off Phares like someone who shares a past with another but not much else. He had the most contemplative solo aria, singing with intent melancholy about being envious of those with "unwavering faith," the orchestral swimming under him like shaky ground.

Whether in a tub-thumping "Christian soldier" chorus, a sweet-toned gospel sextet or the rousing revival-tent scene, the student chorus -- drilled by the university's choral director, Heather Buchanan (and conducted by Paul Hostetter) -- was a marvel of diction, tuning and rhythm. But it also offered something else that's harder to find in professionals: new-minted enthusiasm, vibrancy.

The stage set is highlighted by a shifting dawn-to-dusk sky on video that loomed like heaven's promise. The climax, which is more like hell, was the lone pat moment, off-key compared to what came before. Musical grandiosity and visual sentimentality are almost offensive when depicting the fate of victims in a fiery tragedy, believers or not.

Wall Street Journal Picks - Opera: 'Elmer Gantry'

A show draws on classical, gospel and folk

to bring the 1927 novel to the stage

By ROBERT J. HUGHES

"Elmer Gantry," Sinclair Lewis's 1927 novel about a hypocritical preacher, has been made into a play, a movie and a musical. It is now an opera, which premiered in November at Nashville Opera. It will be performed next week at Montclair State University, Montclair, N.J., Jan. 23-27.

The new show uses gospel, folk and classical music to tell the story of the rise and fall of the evangelist Elmer Gantry in early 20th-century rural America. "New opera has been seen as something confined to a small coterie of listeners and opera nuts who might appreciate new music," says composer Robert Aldridge. He says that he and librettist Herschel Garfein wrote "Elmer Gantry" "not only for opera fans but for people who might never have seen an opera." Mr. Garfein says that he and his partner tried to create characters with "the ambiguity and richness" one encounters in Mozart or Verdi operas. A review in the Tennessean praised the opera for capturing a "boisterous American milieu." A Web site, www.elmergantryopera.com, offers background on the creation of the piece and excerpts from the score.