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IN REVIEW

NASHVILLE — *Elmer Gantry*, Nashville Opera, 11/18/07

Elmer Gantry, by Sinclair Lewis, would seem a natural source property for an opera, but it took seventeen years for this adaptation by composer Robert Aldridge and librettist Herschel Garfein to reach the stage. Originally commissioned by Boston Lyric Opera, the piece was work-shopped, then sadly abandoned until resurrected by Nashville Opera. As demonstrated at its world premiere, *Gantry's* marvelous amalgam of toe-tapping accessibility and stinging social commentary (seen Nov. 18) was entirely worth the wait.

Comparisons with such twentieth-century American operas as *Susannah* and *Baby Doe* are facile but unavoidable. Like those ancestral cousins, *Gantry* explores themes of moral hypocrisy via down-home Americana and weaves indigenous musical elements into what is essentially a "classical" idiom — and like them, the opera makes for a gripping evening of musical theater. The principal roles are gratefully conceived musically, sharply characterized dramatically, and there is some terrific ensemble writing in the form of gospel music (all of Aldridge's own invention, but entirely idiomatic in impact). *Gantry* also boasts a propulsive developmental arc that avoids the common pitfall of hotly burning its inspiration in Act I, only to run on fumes for the duration; its final moment — an ethereal choral diminuendo as a congregation of hapless worshipers is engulfed in fiery immolation with evangelist Sharon Falconer — is one of the most chilling in memory.

Keith Phares, charismatically seductive in voice and person, was ideally cast as Elmer, one of those operatic antiheroes in the line of Don Giovanni and Tom Rakewell, who charm us even as we are repelled by their morally bankrupt nature. Jennifer Rivera was radiant as Sharon (a role conceived for Lorraine Hunt Lieberson), her richly textured mezzo even in scale and capable of the ephemeral dynamics required by the character's mix of revivalist fervor and beatific grace. Tenor Frank Kelley, reprising his assignment from the Boston workshop, made a delightful thing of one of the score's most inventive interludes, a rapid-fire revenge aria (or "Tourette's" aria, per director John Hoomes) for Eddie Fislinger that approaches coloratura in its hysterically frenzied vocal line.

Kristopher Irmiter and Vale Rideout turned in solid performances as T. J. Rigg and Frank, with Malinda Haslett and Brian Banion rounding out the principals as bad girl Lulu Baines and her Reverend father.

Designer Takeshi Kata attractively framed the production with paneling of redwood hue, backed by a sweeping expanse of prairie sky, and small set pieces flown in to establish various locales. Hoomes has proved himself an intriguing iconoclast in other assignments, but he obviously knows how to get out the way when he needs to, deftly handling the narrative's tricky juxtaposition of earthly grit (his rendering of Elmer's outrageous attempts at spiritual marketing were hilarious) and hints of the divine. William Boggs was the vigorous conductor.

Time will tell whether *Elmer Gantry* will enjoy life beyond its promised upcoming remounting at Montclair State, but this work, one of the most enjoyable of premieres heard in many a season, richly deserves wider currency. □

MARK THOMAS KETTERSON

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