

Faust Unleashing a Destroyer of Worlds



Suzanne DeChillo/The New York Times

"Doctor Atomic": Gerald Finley, right, as J. Robert Oppenheimer, with Richard Paul Fink as Oppenheimer's colleague Edward Teller, left, in the Met's production of the John Adams opera, with a libretto by Peter Sellars.

By [ANTHONY TOMMASINI](#)

Published: October 14, 2008

After the premiere of John Adams's "Doctor Atomic" at the San Francisco Opera in October 2005, the original staging by the director Peter Sellars made its way to the other two companies that produced the work: the Netherlands Opera in Amsterdam and the Lyric Opera of Chicago. Most composers would consider that a terrific send-off for a new opera.

Peter Gelb, the general manager of the Metropolitan Opera, wanted to bring "Doctor Atomic" to New York. But he was unimpressed by the Sellars productions. So on Monday night the Met presented its own staging of "Doctor Atomic" by the British film director Penny Woolcock, in her Met debut.

It is rare for an opera composer to have a second production of a new piece so soon. The situation was complicated, because Mr. Sellars was closely involved in the creative process that produced this ambitious, haunting work about the physicist J. Robert Oppenheimer, who presided over the Manhattan Project to build the first atomic bomb.

Mr. Sellars wrote or, more accurately, assembled the libretto for the opera, fashioning passages from interviews with project participants, history books, conversation transcripts, memoirs,

declassified security documents and poetry, notably “The Holy Sonnets” of John Donne. Though Mr. Sellars’s production might not have been his most inspired work, it was vivid, fluid and effective.

When Mr. Gelb hired Ms. Woolcock, she had never worked as a stage director. Her production mixes metaphorical imagery and poignantly human interactions in dramatically involving ways. Seldom has the Met made such elaborate use of videos and electronic sound resources. Presenting a new production was an expensive move for the Met. Whether Ms. Woolcock’s staging represents an improvement over Mr. Sellars’s work is open to question.

The impressive baritone Gerald Finley, who created the daunting lead role unforgettably, brings his portrayal to the Met, grown even richer, more vocally visceral and emotionally nuanced, especially during Oppenheimer’s climactic Act I aria, a setting of Donne’s “Batter My Heart.” Here is this brilliant, arrogant character’s only moment of doubt, anguish and despair.

But the big news may be the work of the conductor Alan Gilbert, in his overdue Met debut. The performance he draws from the Met orchestra and chorus is a revelation. This score continues to impress me as Mr. Adams’s most complex and masterly music. Whole stretches of the orchestral writing tremble with grainy colors, misty sonorities and textural density. Mr. Gilbert exposes the inner details and layered elements of the music: obsessive riffs, pungently dissonant cluster chords, elegiac solo instrumental lines that achingly drift atop nervous, jittery orchestral figurations.

Yet in bringing out the intricacies, he never impedes the music’s organic shape and forward thrust. The tension mounts as Mr. Adams builds up a din of pummeling rhythms and fractured meters, with orchestra chords exploding into shards of harmonic debris: call it Atomic Minimalism.

The central component of Ms. Woolcock’s production, with set designs by Julian Crouch, is a large, movable wall in two sections, each divided into rows of cubicles. When the opera begins at Los Alamos in 1945, we see the scientists, military personnel and major characters of the story holed up inside their individual cubicles, like a human spice rack.

But soon Oppenheimer and his imperious colleague Edward Teller, the bass-baritone Richard Paul Fink (who created this role in the original production), move to the front rim of the stage, where they hover over scientific reports and confront the harrowing implications of the project. The Oppenheimer of “Doctor Atomic” is a 20th-century Faustian figure who understands that he could be unleashing unimaginable forces within the world and even more ominous forces within mankind.

By relying on the metaphorical cubicles during the crucial opening scenes of the opera, Ms. Woolcock constricts some pivotal characters, especially Robert Wilson, the idealistic young physicist, portrayed here by the sweet-voiced tenor Thomas Glenn. Troubled by the unknowns and implications of the experiment, Wilson has called together meetings of concerned scientists. But stuck in his cubicle, he is distanced from Oppenheimer during their heated exchanges, and thus diminished.

Elsewhere Ms. Woolcock has devised touchingly human scenes for the characters. During one, as a group of scientists tinkers with the actual bomb, another relaxes at night by watching the 1939 film “Beau Geste,” the scene in which Gary Cooper and his two brothers who have joined the French Foreign Legion face attacks from Arabs in the North African desert.

The scenes with Oppenheimer’s wife, Kitty, sung with aching, wistful intensity by the mezzo-soprano Sasha Cooke, are beautifully rendered. Kitty, an insecure alcoholic, humanizes Oppenheimer, who loves and accepts her. During a romantic scene in the bedroom, they sing in a dialogue of quotations from the poets Baudelaire and Muriel Rukeyser, and Mr. Adams’s rapturous music is like updated, harmonically unhinged Debussy.

Yet just as Oppenheimer avoids facing Kitty’s troubles head-on, he shuts off the part of his brain that would allow moral scruples to impede his work. The mezzo-soprano Meredith Arwady, in her Met debut, was also affecting as the fearful Pueblo Indian maid Pasqualita, a sort of Erda of the Southwest, who cares for Kitty with maternal affection.

In adding video to the production, Ms. Woolcock uses the shuttered cubicles as backdrop screens, projecting images of pelting desert rain or maps of potential target cities in Japan. Because Mr. Adams uses amplification and electronics in the orchestra, he has requested that, to achieve the right balances, the singers and chorus use body microphones. The Met complies.

Though the miking of the individual singers is quite subtle, the chorus comes across as strident during full-voiced outbursts. I am still not convinced that the sound-enhanced payoff is worth compromising the principle of opera as a haven for natural sound.

But during climactic moments, when recorded sounds, spoken voices, radio static and eerie noise create aural collages, the effect is chilling. At the end it’s deafening, when the recorded tracks evoke the cataclysmic aftermath of the detonation. Wisely, Mr. Adams never sets the actual explosion to music. To convey such a thing would be trite.

The bass-baritone Eric Owens, in his Met debut, portrays the blustery Army commander on the project, Gen. Leslie Groves. One moment the stocky general is bellowing threats to a beleaguered military meteorologist, the next he is bragging to Oppenheimer about his success at calorie counting. During this scene, Mr. Adams enshrouds Groves with alluring harmonies and pleasing melodic lines, as if the orchestra were urging the one person on the project with the power to call off the test to do so before it is too late.

Sadly, the opera is all too timely. As the scientists worry about the implications of the bomb — if, that is, the “gadget,” as they call it, actually works — Oppenheimer cautions them that the nation’s fate should be left “in the hands of the best men in Washington.”

DOCTOR ATOMIC

By John Adams; librettist, Peter Sellars; conductor, Alan Gilbert; production, Penny Woolcock; set designer, Julian Crouch; costume designer, Catherine Zuber; lighting designer, Brian MacDevitt; Andrew Dawson, choreographer; video designed by Fifty Nine Productions; Mark

Grey, sound designer. In English, with Met Titles in English, German and Spanish. Running time: 3 hours 25 minutes. In repertory through Nov. 13 at the [Metropolitan Opera](#) House, [Lincoln Center](#); (212) 362-6000; [metopera.org](#).

WITH: Gerald Finley (J. Robert Oppenheimer), Sasha Cooke (Kitty Oppenheimer), Richard Paul Fink ([Edward Teller](#)), Thomas Glenn ([Robert Wilson](#)), Eric Owens (Gen. Leslie Groves) and Meredith Arwady (Pasqualita)