

Samuel Black , Published September 23 2011

## 'Pocahontas' provokes thought through soaring music, story



The Minnesota premier of “Pocahontas,” an opera by Minneapolis composer Linda Tutas Haugen, soared through the air last night at Fregeau Auditorium on the Marshall School Campus.

This one-act opera, based on a libretto by Joan Vail Thorne, attempts to tell the story — not the history — of a young American Indian woman who died on the shores of England when she was only 19 years old.

Staged by the Duluth Festival Opera and directed by Craig Fields, this opera is one of the most riveting 100 minutes I have ever attended. Conductor Markand Thakar confidently led a chamber orchestra of nine players through this exceptionally lyric, though rhythmically very diverse, score.

In about fifteen different episodes, the opera moves full circle from the early death of this “woman of two worlds,” back through the arrival of the English at Jamestown, feeble attempts at coexisting between cultures, her ultimate abduction, conversion, marriage in England, birth of a son, and death before Pocahontas/Rebecca could return to her homeland.

In this production, eight singers take on fourteen different roles, with fourteen chorus singers doubling as stage crew. Two Fond du Lac singer/ drummers and three traditional dancers offered transition from one powerful scene to the next.

The text, crafted by Thorne, blends traditional themes with a story created from the few fragments that have survived. But the true success of this opera is in the haunting, soaring melodies and harmonies created by Haugen; powerfully sung by these gifted singers. Linh Kauffman as the young woman and Juli Bunyak as the child begin and end this beautiful opera with their soprano duet seeking to understand ‘who I am.’ Andrew Fernando, a powerful baritone, gives depth and power to the role of Powhatan, the native chief of many tribes. As he blesses Capt. John Smith as his brother, he can only puzzle about “who is this man.”

Smith himself is portrayed by tenor Andrew Oakden, who also appears as an Anglican Priest, the Rev. Whitaker in Jamestown, and Capt. Argall, Pocahontas’ abductor. As

Smith, his letter to King James while anticipating execution is emotional and heart-rending.

As narrator, Thorne created the anonymous Mother of Pocahontas, and soprano Jessica Medoff moves close to every woman with her plea that “nobody knows who I am, but I live in the child of my child.”

Behind the simple, layered stage platform were three huge screens depicting natural scenes and American Indian portraits from a 17th century painter, all of which created an expansive backdrop to the tableau. When the scene shifted to England, the tutor John Rolfe, sung by baritone Branch Fields, found the affection for his pupil, Pocahontas, much stronger than their need for vocabulary. The duet about each “mouth is the opening to your heart” lovingly promised more than the short-lived marriage turned out to be.

In brief, this is an exquisite cameo of an opera, with a thought-provoking blend of the tensions of the Jamestown encounter. We cannot change any of what happened there, but it is good to listen to beautiful music, and attempt to understand the complexity of human lives caught in transition. The smoke from the opening pipe ritual from Fond du Lac member Bryan Jon still hung in the air as the audience stood and enthusiastically offered their appreciation.

*Samuel Black is a Duluth musician and writer who is very happy to welcome a new opera season.*