

THE TROPES OF TENTH STREET

MUSINGS OF A CRAFTY IF SELF-CRITICAL ACADEMIC

SUNDAY, MAY 8, 2011

The Death of Don Juan

In 2009, I [reviewed](#) Elodie Lauten's *The Two Cents Opera* and I was delighted to see another work by her last night, *The Death of Don Juan* (directed by Robert Lawson and Henry Akona and playing at the [Theater for the New City](#). Although the subjects of the two operas--the current economic crisis and the waning days of the legendary amorist--could not be more manifestly different, in a way there was a common thread in that both were stories of a way of life that was no longer sustainable, that a lifestyle of avaricious greed and one of lascivious sexual appetite were coming to an end and approaching a moment of critical reflection, as the Owl of Minerva poked its head above the litter of wasted time and misguided braggadocio.



As Lauten's Don Juan says finally in his final parabasis, his great dirge:

"I am spent I am done There is no goodbye I am lost I am found There is no reply I have loved many times I have truly lived I am deaf I am dumb I have lost my sight I am only human now"



Don Juan's sexual and moral transgressions are the diametrical opposite of Oedipus's--while the ancient king's sins were unintentional and monogamous, the modern lecher's are polygamous and knowing--but in both cases a true knowledge, a deeper knowledge, only intervenes after their illusions about themselves have been shattered.

The lighting, visual whirl-patterns (fractals of the sort associated with chaos theory), costumes, and superb singing, dancing, and acting all made contributions to what was an exemplary instance of many worlds of creativity coalescing into a riveting, intense, cathartic experience that will not just absorb you, but make you think and feel.

As with *The Two-Cents Opera* I feel bound to insist the appellation of **opera** is not gratuitous; this is not the conventional kind of opera, but it is opera. I have been listening to a lot of baroque opera lately, and the stylization of form, the brevity of the overall work, and yet the clear presence of emotion even if not the melodramatic emotion to which we are operatically accustomed is something Lauten shares with Handel and Carissimi. The music is perhaps closer to classical minimalism than the more overtly post-minimalist *Two-Cents Opera*; it has the intimacy of chamber music with the spiritual declarativeness of opera. Based on a complicated set of patterns both mathematical and astrological and psychological, both Eastern and western, it is both technological and mystical. Lauten seems to be saying we cannot do without either mathematics or spirituality, that to bifurcate our cultural outlook to only accommodate one is to be *ipso facto* cognitively impoverished.

This is a very busy time for many, with end of academic term, people scrambling to do stuff before they go away for the summer, and so on. Fortunately, the opera's run is a generous one, extending through May 22. Please take the time to see this short but emotionally intense piece. It is rare to see work that will genuinely be part of the cultural conversation in the next twenty years and *The Death of Don Juan* is certainly of that caliber. [Buy tickets now!](#)

POSTED BY NICHOLAS BIRNS AT 6:12 AM 0 COMMENTS 

[LINKS TO THIS POST](#)