

DEATH AND THE POWERS

A NEW OPERA BY TOD MACHOVER

OPERA NEWS

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DALLAS

Tod Machover's *Death and the Powers*, which arrived at Dallas Opera on February 15, is a big work with big ideas. The concept of human consciousness merging with computer hardware is as big as that of any opera, and Machover brings to bear his considerable technical prowess in the world of technology, as well as his deep sense of musical history, to explore this premise. As the audience filed into the magnificent Winspear Opera House, four robots sat quietly inert at center stage. Any question of the trajectory of the piece was quickly put to rest as the four robots, built by Machover and members of the MIT Media Lab, came to life, each representing the main characters of the opera and setting the stage with a brief and highly stylized introduction (complete with robot voices straight out of central casting and complemented by Machover's signature electronics) explaining that they were in fact reenacting a drama in order to understand the human experience, specifically the concept of death. The music moved seamlessly between the robot and human worlds, and conductor Nicole Paiement, cofounder of Opera Parallèle, did a spectacular job of leading the orchestra through the one-and-a-half-hour, single-act work. Stage direction was by Andrew Eggert, after the original stage direction by Diane Paulus.

A transformation from robot to human, and from electronic to acoustic,



Risley, Orth and Harvey in *Death and the Powers* in Dallas

was simply and cleverly masked by flashing strobes, from which Robert Orth emerged as multi-billionaire Simon Powers. Orth embodied the character perfectly, at once endearing and repulsing the audience with his portrayal of an incredibly rich man who has bought the key to immortality. He is joined by his daughter, Miranda, his third wife, Evvy, and his protégé Nicholas. After Powers makes his transition into "The System," Evvy becomes interested in joining him, while Miranda remains skeptical, unable to reconcile the human experience with eternal life. The former is illustrated when Evvy reminisces with Powers about their first date, bringing to the surface other memories that lead to a new erotic encounter.

Patricia Risley's portrayal of Evvy was smoky and sensual without descending into simple pouting, and she gave real depth to a character that otherwise might be viewed simply as an overly sexualized trophy wife.

A delegation of the United Nations, the Administration, and the United Way appears to appeal to Powers to return balance to a human world torn apart by the void he has left, and David Kravitz, Tom McNichols and Frank Kelley all helped to fill out the story and provide a bit of comic relief. Despite the weight of the title and the existential nature of the subject, much of the opera is quite funny. How can you not laugh at a disembodied egomaniac who assures the audience that he's got billions of bucks and, despite his non-corporeal nature, can still sign the checks? It is in the final scene that Machover shows his operatic chops and Joëlle Harvey's Miranda all but steals the show. Torn between her love for her father and her need to maintain her humanity, she is beset on all sides by the Miseries, the huddled masses of the world, who descend on her and threaten to consume her. Miranda then confronts her father, who continues to try to convince her that entering "The System" is the only option for the future of humanity. Miranda rejects this notion, repeating the word "Live, live, live!" as the orchestra reaches a thrilling fever pitch.

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