

# Songs, singers excel, but story can be murky

OPERA REVIEW | 'Garner' at Auditorium almost has it all



Tracie Luck (center), who takes over the "Margaret Garner" title role in remaining performances, sings in a rehearsal last week. | RICH HEIN/SUN-TIMES

## **'MARGARET GARNER'**

### **RECOMMENDED**

**When:** 7 p.m. Thursday, 7:30 p.m.  
Saturday, 3 p.m. Sunday

**Where:** Auditorium Theatre, 50 E.  
Congress

**Tickets:** \$40-\$150

**Phone:** (312) 902-1500

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The basic story — facing capture, a runaway slave in the South kills her children rather than see them returned to slavery — is virtually made for the opera stage.

The singers, led by the deservedly acclaimed mezzo-soprano Denyce Graves, bring lustrous voices, good looks and well-honed acting skills to their roles.

The score, by American composer Richard Danielpour, has many moments of inventive orchestral color and eloquent, lyrical song.

Nonetheless, something seemed to be missing at the Chicago premiere Saturday of “Margaret Garner,” Danielpour’s 2005 opera with libretto by novelist Toni Morrison. In the end, the tragedy unfolding onstage at the Auditorium Theatre failed to hold us spellbound.

One problem, I think, was Morrison’s libretto, which occasionally became opaque at crucial moments. In the final courtroom scene, a chorus of spectators nattered on that Garner, on trial for stealing her slave owner’s property (her children), wasn’t like them. Danielpour’s choruses were high points of the opera, full of inspired details that instantly turned a group of anonymous singers into busybody Southern belles or human beings crushed by rage and despair. Hearing the chorus’ self-satisfied courtroom buzzing and watching their bobbing heads was chilling.

But when Graves’ Garner finally answered her accusers, the moment fell short. Roused from prolonged, numbed silence, Garner stood and hurled her response. She agreed that she was not like the courtroom spectators. “I am me,” she declared, proudly defiant. Well, yes, but what exactly does that mean?

“Margaret Garner” is based on the true story that inspired Morrison to write her Pulitzer Prize-winning 1987 novel *Beloved*. Morrison certainly knew what Garner was thinking, but she didn’t always make it clear to us.

There were pleasures to cherish, however, in this handsome produc-



Denyce Graves

tion borrowed from Michigan Opera Theatre, which commissioned “Margaret Garner.” As Margaret’s husband, Robert, Chicago native Greg Baker brought a warm baritone to his fully rounded portrait of a man battling to protect his family. Canadian baritone James West-

man managed to swagger without turning slave owner Edward Gaines into a caricature.

Soprano Mary Elizabeth Williams was a loving presence as Cilla, Robert’s mother, yet her effortless vocal flights between smoky depths and bell-like heights revealed a spine of steel. Kristine Biller Mattson was equally strong as Caroline Gaines, Edward’s genteel but slavery-hating daughter.

Conductor Stefan Lano kept the opera going at a brisk pace while drawing nuanced color from the Chicago Sinfonietta. Kenny Leon’s stage direction was both lively and thoughtful. Sets by Marjorie Bradley Kellogg, with their fragments of a plantation house porch and the raw walls of a slave cottage, were evocative.

One of the greatest pleasures Saturday night was the chance to experience fully staged grand opera in the Auditorium’s golden glow. Opened in 1889 and designed by Dankmar Adler and Louis Sullivan expressly for opera, the theater is fabled for its warm, clear acoustics. It has been decades since Chicagoans have been able to hear this sound uncontaminated by electronic amplification, and it was clear on Saturday that the Auditorium truly is an extraordinary showcase for the human voice. Let’s hope more opera will be coming to its stage.

(One minor quibble: Supertitles were too small, and the type, with its busy serif design, was difficult to read.)

There will be some cast changes in remaining "Margaret Garner" performances. Tracie Luck, highly praised for her performances in the title role at the New York City Opera last year, will replace Graves. Karen Slack will sing Cilla and Timothy Mix will sing Edward Gaines on Thursday and Sunday. Leonard Rowe sings Robert Garner on Thursday.

*Free-lance writer Wynne Delacombe is the Sun-Times' former classical music critic.*