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MUSIC REVIEW

Opera With Washington and Lenin? Revolutionary!

By ANTHONY TOMMASINI

The Kitchen, the proudly alternative performance venue in New York's Chelsea neighborhood, could have safely celebrated its 25th anniversary by revisiting its vibrant past. For a while, this ramshackle space, formerly an actual hotel kitchen, was mission control for the downtown new music scene. Here, Philip Glass, Laurie Anderson and other iconoclasts staged a rebellion against the concert music status quo. To its credit, instead of looking back, the Kitchen acknowledged its birthday by commissioning "Naked Revolution," a multimedia opera by the composer Dave Soldier and the librettist Maita di Niscemi. The work was given its premiere on Thursday night. But if the idea was to show the Kitchen still at the cutting edge, the production was a sad failure.

The opera begins with a Russian immigrant cab driver on his psychiatrist's couch in Manhattan, telling of his disturbing dreams: he keeps seeing George Washington conducting an orchestra from atop a tank in Red Square, or sitting in a drab modern office, a strange man with false teeth.

But this fanciful dream becomes merely a setup for a 90-minute fantasy in which Washington, Lenin, Duchamp, Isadora Duncan and other revolutionaries mingle and pontificate. That all revolutions eventually pass by is a running theme of the work, made visual through images of gilded public statues being torn down by subsequent revolutionaries. But



Rahav Segev

Dina Emerson, center, in "Naked Revolution," a multimedia opera.

the major problem here is not lame concept, but poor quality.

In other works, Mr. Soldier has confidently drawn from his mixed roots in swing, rock, country and classical styles. But he seems unsure of himself here. There are timid songs with a country twang, fractured dances, droning choruses, and ominous bits where the instruments flit about in zigzagging unison lines

over weighty pedal tones. The score never coalesces, though the conductor Richard Auldson Clark and the Manhattan Chamber Orchestra, fortified with accordion, guitar, electric keyboard and extra timpani, do their best to inject vitality into it.

Given the wackiness and daring that the opera was striving for, it was hard to know how to take Ms. di Niscemi's libretto. To rather face-

A reminder that a hero soon becomes a has-been.

less music, three sons of liberty sing: "Don't tread on us/I'll tell you why/Our motto is/Live free or die." Is this ironic? Satiric? The multimedia elements are essentially just humdrum projected images on backdrop curtains. The artistic concept is credited to Vitaly Komar and Alexander Melamid. An ill-at-ease cast, directed by David Herskovits, seemed to have been selected more for dramatic skills than vocal resources, but the work underused the former and overtaxed the latter.

The tenor Tony Boutté, as the cab driver, Duchamp and various other characters, had his moments. There were some surreal comic exchanges when Washington, in a sense, sang duets with himself: the general, all stiff in his uniform (sung by the bass Robert Osborne), and the citizen, an effete aristocrat (sung by the baritone Jimmy Justice). Mr. Soldier's score was most effective when it turned aggressive, as in a later choral scene: the matching of music and drama seemed arbitrary, but at least something raw was happening. All revolutions eventually pass by; great statues crumble. That is not the message the Kitchen meant to project about itself, but it was hard to avoid thinking it. "Naked Revolution" runs through Saturday.