

The New York Times

July 3, 2012

Secret Desires in the Heart of 'Billy Budd'

By ZACHARY WOOLFE

LONDON — I have a confession to make about Britten's [opera](#) "Billy Budd": I don't like it very much. I struggle with its listless pace; its largely flat characters; the way its libretto, by E. M. Forster and Eric Crozier, prefers telling us what people are thinking rather than showing it.

But it is one of the opera's lessons that in antipathy there is always an element of fascination, and I keep on trying to bring myself to "Billy Budd," based on Melville's parable of good and evil on a British naval vessel caught in the fraught aftermath of the French Revolution. In May I saw [the revival of John Dexter's classic 1978 production](#) at the Metropolitan Opera, and on Saturday evening a performance of David Alden's new production for the English National Opera here.

It is to the work's credit that it can respond plausibly to approaches as different as Dexter's and Mr. Alden's. The Met's production, conceived at a time when modern opera struggled even more than now to ingratiate itself to the general public, is eye-poppingly grand: a naturalistic, stage-filling cross-section of a man-of-war. Yet this is spectacle with a brain, subtly placing scenes above and behind others to emphasize the ship's punishing hierarchies and deceptions.

The National's version is starker: a stylized take on a wooden ship's hull, which, as Anthony Tommasini observed [in his review](#) in The New York Times last week, aims for "psychological, not scenic, realism." Like [Claire Denis's 1999 film, "Beau Travail,"](#) which transferred the story to a remote French Foreign Legion post in East Africa, Mr. Alden's production is aggressive, even sadistic, with the ship envisioned as something akin to a chain gang.

Both productions work, and both performances were tight: strongly sung, passionately acted and perceptively conducted. Yet both evenings my attention kept wandering, and I came to think, watching "Billy Budd" at the National, that the trouble was the sense in the opera of the listener's being kept at bay, in a way that irritates rather than intrigues.

Most damning, for all of its reliance on declarations of thoughts and feelings rather than their revelation through action, the opera simply doesn't say very much. Like a limp therapy session, there is much talk but little insight or interest. "Billy Budd" is a work populated by people with secret feelings. But these secrets never translate into dramatic tension; considering all the

emotions in play, the temperature onstage remains stubbornly cool. You get the impression of feelings unfronted, of characters and situations expertly, even beautifully, glossed over rather than explored.

It is worth remembering that “Billy Budd” is a product of the gay closet. It is an opera composed by a closeted gay man, to a libretto written by Forster, a closeted gay man, based on a novella by a man who scholars often suggest was closeted and that revolves around the attractions of men to other men. Though Melville protests, when describing the malevolent master-at-arms, Claggart, that his mysterious evil nature “partakes nothing of the sordid or sensual,” there is no mistaking the secret desire at the core of his hatred of Billy.

Forster wrote that Claggart’s aria at the end of Act I, which consciously echoes Iago’s “Credo” in Verdi’s “Otello,” represents “love constricted, perverted, poisoned, but never the less *flowing* down its agonizing channel; a sexual discharge gone evil.”

This discharge is not too far from the spilled soup that Melville describes streaming past Claggart’s feet when he first encounters Billy, the “greasy fluid” that Claggart fantasizes to be “the sly escape of a spontaneous feeling on Billy’s part.”

In the opera a novice sailor cries, “I’m done for,” after he is flogged, and the chorus answers, “Yes, lost forever on the endless sea.”

Another sailor tries to reassure him. “The pain will soon pass,” he says.

“The shame will never pass,” the novice responds, and confesses that “my heart’s broken.”

The Met’s staging, in which the sailor looms behind the bent-over novice during this passage, highlights the way that the flogging can easily be read as a metaphor for gay sex. The novella and the opera do more than describe the closet, with its anxiety and coded messages; detached and diffident, they feel closeted themselves.

Both also inadvertently reveal a great truth about the closet: It’s boring to watch. Like any magic realm with its languages and codes, it is wholly engrossing only when you’re inside it; from the outside, it is less compelling, less mysterious than evasive.

The work has its greatest tension and highest stakes when the specificities of individual personalities are transcended, and the chorus is singing. “Heave, oh, heave away, heave,” they chant near the beginning of the opera, to a haunting melody that echoes throughout Ms. Denis’s

“Beau Travail.” Near the end, after Billy has been hanged for killing Claggart, the sailors come together in a restive growl, murmuring and groaning as they move tantalizingly close to mutiny.

It was a thrilling moment in the performance at the Met: the chorus rich and threatening as it shuffled around in helpless anger. Indeed, it is the sequence in the opera when the theme of the closet — the repression of illicit passion — pays dividends. Here we finally feel the tension and are forced to confront the underlying emotions.

Unfortunately, it happened to be the moment in the National’s production when Mr. Alden overplayed his hand. Rather than simmering and fading away, the sailors in his version actually revolt, and are violently suppressed, a heavy-handed take on a simmering passage.

Mr. Alden’s interpretation of Claggart, though, showed a deep understanding of the opera. As brilliantly acted and sung by the bass Matthew Rose — decades younger than James Morris, the venerable artist who sang the role in the Met’s revival in May — the master-at-arms was pale and wide-eyed, seemingly shellshocked by the trauma of his own secrets.

He emanated the anger that arises out of great frustration. Restrained and intense, Mr. Rose’s performance was as powerful and troubling a representation of the enervating effects of the closet — effects demonstrated by the resolute aloofness of Britten’s opera — as Heath Ledger’s in “Brokeback Mountain.”

“Billy Budd” runs through Sunday at the English National Opera in London; eno.org.