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Yes, the Wall Stayed Up, But How Was the Opera? What the East Coast Critics Say About *Grendel*

By Vivien Schweitzer
16 Jul 2006



Eric Owens as the title character in Elliot Goldenthal's *Grendel*.
photo by Robert Millard

It seems like no wall this side of Berlin has ever attracted so much attention as George Tsypin's 18-ton, 48-foot-tall, million-dollar behemoth. The rotating edifice is the set for the debut run of Elliot Goldenthal's opera *Grendel*, conceived with and directed by his wife, Julie Taymor.

Following all-too-widely reported technical hitches and consequent delays in presenting the work's world premiere in Los Angeles, the mega-wall made it to New York in one piece for its appearance at the Lincoln Center Festival.

Finally, some column inches could focus on the music and the production. *Grendel* has a libretto by Taymor and J. D. McClatchy based on John Gardner's 1971 novel of the same title, which retells the 8th-century epic *Beowulf* from the eponymous monster's perspective.

Critical opinion differed rather widely. *The New York Sun* described the production as, like its subject, a "misshapen and misbegotten waif," while *The Philadelphia Inquirer* wrote, "in comparison to so many well-made, well-mannered operas that have crossed the stage of late, *Grendel* is a fearlessly R-rated pageant with so much to say and so many imaginative ways of saying it that you're willing to wait until the two-act piece finds its footing somewhere near the end of Act I."

There were cheers from audience and critics alike for bass-baritone Eric Owens, who, according to all reports, was excellent in the challenging and exhausting title role. *The New York Times* reported that the "stentorian bass got through it, summoning power when called for and inhabiting the part with abandon, even while wearing a body-encasing monster outfit." The paper added that the role of the Dragon, sung by mezzo-soprano Denyce Grave, "cruelly keeps her singing in a chesty, almost baritone range, before pushing her to soprano highs."

The Newark *Star Ledger* said "the work has a compelling middle, but its long setup and anti-climatic finish are muddled and bland in a way that John Gardner's 1971 novel never is." The paper thought that musically, the "opera's tour-de-force, musically and theatrically, is the scene in which the omniscient Dragon grudgingly advises Grendel on the wherefores of the world."

Goldenthal's score won mixed reviews elsewhere. *Newsday* said the music "has its patches of generic modernist lurching, offset by considerable beauties"; the *Inquirer* thought that while Act I was unconvincing, "Act II stakes a claim for Goldenthal as a major composer with a powerful gift for dramatic specificity."

The *Washington Post* thought the wall was worth the effort, writing "visually, the results are magnificent — one stunning scene after another, and nothing out of place."



From Elliot Goldenthal's *Grendel*: Denyce Graves (top) as the Dragon; Eric Owens, dancers — and that wall.
photo by Robert Millard

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