

REVIEW / L.A. Opera captures savagery of brilliant 'Grendel'

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Published 4:00 a.m., Saturday, June 10, 2006

2006-06-10 04:00:00 PDT Los Angeles -- In "Grendel," John Gardner's 1971 retelling of the "Beowulf" story, the title character's view of the world is shaken by his first encounter with art, a bard's song with the miraculous ability to transform the mud and degradation of human existence into a gleaming, beautiful lie.

The brilliant operatic "Grendel" that had its world premiere at the Los Angeles Opera on Thursday night, with music by Elliot Goldenthal and a libretto by director Julie Taymor and poet J.D. McClatchy, has something of the same breath-stealing quality.

The piece may not inspire a wholesale revision of anyone's conceptual life, if only because its audiences are likely to have more prior experience with the sorcery of art than poor Grendel, the man-eating mythical monster who bedevils the ancient Danes.

But Thursday's opening performance at the Dorothy Chandler Pavilion -- an opening postponed by more than a week after the intricate computer-driven set suffered technical malfunctions -- was still a dazzling display of musical and theatrical inventiveness.

Goldenthal's compulsively resourceful score encompasses a rich variety of moods and strategies, from crisp bardic song to tender rhapsody to percussion-driven sonic assaults. Taymor's staging, peopled by the full-size puppets and phantasmagorical stage effects that have marked her work in "The Lion King" and as far back as "Juan Darién," is as visually striking as anything she's done.

And in Grendel himself, sung with prodigious stamina and grace by baritone Eric Owens, the opera gives voice to one of modern literature's most distinctive figures -- a Romantic, a nihilist, an ironist and a willing pawn of artistic tradition.

Gardner's fleet, poetic novel turned "Beowulf" inside out by presenting Grendel's own view of his depredations against the Danish king Hrothgar -- what Grendel calls his "idiotic war." His self-justifications are complex, evasive and infused with a dark and sometimes savage wit.

He's an outcast from society, the accursed spawn of Cain (or so he believes, having heard it from Hrothgar's bard). But he's also soft-hearted -- vulnerable to the beauty of Hrothgar's new queen, occasionally open to the idea of changing his murderous ways -- and knowingly realistic about the myths by which humans operate.

Grendel is an existential thinker as well, his raids and massacres at times undertaken simply to keep meaninglessness at bay. But his most important role is a counterpart to the great Beowulf, who is coming over the sea to kill him -- the event to which his entire life is merely a preamble.

As in Gardner's book, "Grendel" unfolds in a series of self-contained scenes, each one granted its own dramatic shape and emotional color. As we learn in an early funeral for a fallen fighter, the humans sing in stately Anglo-Saxon, a contrast to Grendel's fleet-footed, sometimes contemporary English.

Grendel's childhood is summed up in a quick clash with the local kids that cements his status as a pariah. The shining songs of the bard, delivered with high, keening intensity by tenor Richard Croft, soar through the air like snowflakes.

For the arrival of Queen Wealtheow, Goldenthal writes a long, sustained cantabile, brightly sung by soprano Laura Claycomb, that conveys the ache her beauty inspires in Grendel's soul. Beowulf himself is voicelessly portrayed in the whirlingly athletic solo dancing of Desmond Richardson, choreographed by Angelin Preljocaj.

Perhaps the most exhilarating stroke of invention is the depiction of the Dragon, whom Grendel visits for advice ("Seek out gold -- but not my gold -- and sit on it"). In this version, she's a far-ranging mezzo draped in fiery red and green -- the great Denyce Graves, in a star turn -- with a trio of girl-group Dragonettes sprouting from her tail who reinforce her utterances.

Any operatic dragon, especially one with a huge scaly head and puffs of stage smoke emerging from its nostrils, inevitably brings to mind Wagner's *Fafner*. And in fact, echoes of the "Ring" cycle are frequent.

The moment the curtain rises on *Grendel*, clothed by costume designer Constance Hoffman in a reptilian motley of muck and slime and clambering across the giant rocky slab of George Tsybin's set, an operagoer will recognize a close cousin of the malignant dwarf Alberich.

Goldenthal has some fun with these echoes in his treatment of Unferth, the mush-brained muscleman whose earnest ideas of heroism *Grendel* treats with pitiless scorn. He's Siegfried all over again, but brushed aside this time like a rag doll, and tenor Jay Hunter Morris relished the leaping, comically stirring vocal writing.

The evening's true hero, though, was Owens, the gifted American baritone who recently created the role of General Groves in John Adams' "Doctor Atomic." On stage for nearly the entire three hours, he gave a performance marked by vocal virtuosity and emotional transparency -- never more so than in his haunting final elegy as he embraces death.

The performance was conducted with vigorous skill by Steven Sloane, and enlivened throughout by Taymor's kinetic stage pictures. The puppets alone are a marvel -- a scrap-metal goat whose clockwork wheels conjure up the force of brute instinct, or the dirt-and-branches creatures that *Grendel* and his mother live among -- and there are acrobatic scenes of the carnage *Grendel* wreaks.

"*Grendel*" was co-commissioned with the Lincoln Center Festival in New York, which will stage it in July. If we're lucky, it may even come closer to home one of these days.

Los Angeles Opera: Elliot Goldenthal's *Grendel* runs through June 17 at the Dorothy Chandler Pavilion. Tickets: \$30-\$205. Call (213) 972-8001 or visit www.laopera.com.

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