

Beauty and the Beastly

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In 'Grendel,' a Feast for the Eyes but an Ache for the Ears

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For centuries people have wondered: What is Grendel? Readers of the Old English poem "Beowulf" know him as some kind of shaggy man-beast with a thirst for human blood. Grendel's powers are so extraordinarily larger than human -- he can carry off 30 Danish warriors and snack on them at one go -- but his rage so peculiarly human -- he hates with focus, determination and strategy -- that he seems to straddle categories.

Audiences who saw the East Coast premiere of the new opera "Grendel" will wonder again: What is Grendel? They saw a big shaggy thing that also straddles categories. The show, composed by Elliot Goldenthal and directed by his companion, Julie Taymor, whose gifts range from the smash Broadway musical "The Lion King" to the movie "Titus," opened Tuesday evening at New York's Lincoln Center Festival, fresh from an initially ill-fated run in Los Angeles (its opening was delayed for technical reasons, an almost unheard-of gaffe in the opera business).

It is called an opera and it opened in an opera house, but it's best not to leave the definition there. Even for those who didn't see this visually sumptuous but musically frustrating theater piece, "Grendel" is a portentous work: big, impressive and a bit ominous. Shows like this are taking opera in new directions, so much so that even the name opera must now be rethought or more carefully applied -- in which case, "Grendel" may not qualify. At the very least, for better and worse, this sort of spectacle points to what audiences can expect in the future.

"Grendel" is based on the 1971 novel by John Gardner, who also wondered what (or who) is Grendel -- and answered with a book-length monologue that suggests the monster is a nihilist tempted by art but not enough to refrain from a barbaric will to power. The novel was more highly regarded a generation ago, placed by one critic in the same stellar category as Salinger's "Catcher in the Rye" and Golding's "Lord of the Flies." It feels a little slimmer now, but it's still a good book, funny and blasphemous when it comes to the pieties of art and ideals.

The tone of Gardner's book is elusive. The monster isn't romanticized in the manner of Mary Shelley's "Frankenstein," but Gardner was savvy enough to make him likable, even as the author carefully respected the "Beowulf" poem's indictment of Grendel's crimes. Grendel's voice is familiar, and in the end, you realize that you know him well: He's one of those fabulous old drunks who used to haunt the English departments of small universities, with his head filled with the poems of Milton and Plath, his heart filled with self-loathing and his liver filled with half-metabolized gin. Gardner's Grendel could walk out of his cave and straight into Albee's "Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?" without so much as chipping a teacup.

The makers of the new opera got the tone almost right. Grendel is played by Eric Owens, a bass with a stentorian voice and great stamina who makes the most of the comedy and mayhem. Dressed in a fleshy gray costume that renders him repulsive, Owens dominates the opera, observing the lovely humans as they struggle to construct something like civilization in the shadow of his terrorizing and "idiotic war." Librettists Taymor and J.D. McClatchy preserve the monster's deflating asides, his unprintable expletives that puncture

the heroic posturing of poseurs such as the unheroic Unferth (sung by Jay Hunter Morris). The libretto follows the book closely; perhaps, given its almost three-hour length, too closely.

Turning literature into opera has, historically, almost always meant wringing all the fun, irony and philosophy out of the original. This time, no. But the same process of operizing literature also has generally meant a deep infusion of sentimentality, and, alas, "Grendel" is no exception. In Gardner and in the original "Beowulf" poem, Grendel is descended from the cursed race of Cain, and thus his rage is ultimately due to the irrational favoritism of the Lord for one brother over another. The monster's rage is now traced to a little schoolyard bullying (can pop psychology ever be exorcised from middlebrow art?).

Although Gardner's Grendel is both attracted to art and contemptuous of it, in the opera, the monster jumps in and revels in it. And in human love, too. One of the most visually stunning scenes -- of one of Grendel's avatars in a boat making sweet musical love to a beautiful queen -- is also one of the opera's biggest missteps.

Every time this opera goes wrong, a familiar refrain rings in the back of your head: They just couldn't resist. An aesthetic of indulgence governs the whole show, an aesthetic that feels very West Coast, very Hollywood. And indeed the opera is by a composer with major Hollywood bona fides (his credits include the soundtracks for "Frida" and "Batman Forever"), and it was commissioned by the Los Angeles Opera, run by Washington's own Placido Domingo, who has been bringing in film talent to fancy-up the L.A. production values. The inclusion of Taymor, for whom nothing is impossible onstage, cinches it: "Grendel" is an all-and-everything work, the more the better, and damn the old niceties of refining, editing and distilling the final product to something essential.

Visually, the results are magnificent -- one stunning scene after another, and nothing out of place. The action is dominated by a huge, revolving white wall with a center panel that opens to create different theatrical spaces (it was a wall malfunction that led to the delayed opening in Los Angeles). Dance, lighting, projections and stage design are intricately detailed and fully integrated into an artistic whole: Taymor uses inventive puppetry and colorful design to build an eminently believable mythical world peopled by fantastic ogres.

Opera lovers should demand no less in any production of any classic. Unfortunately the opera world isn't populated with Julie Taymors but with innumerable mediocrities who put the same meaningless stage nonsense up night after desultory night.

Musically, the results are less satisfying. "Grendel" is filled with gimmicks that never quite have the impact they're meant to. A trio of "dragonettes" who fill out one of the better scenes, in which Grendel meets and rejects the wisdom of a world-weary dragon, has no sizzle. Beowulf is sung not by a heroic tenor (the obvious solution) but by a chorus standing on the sides of the stage, but the choral lines are uninteresting. The composer throws a lot in, but not a lot comes out. And while the libretto gets the basic humor of the work, the music doesn't follow its lead.

But, oh, it could have been so much worse. Music lovers may remember Goldenthal's 1996 "Fire Water Paper: A Vietnam Oratorio." Critics have never really forgiven Goldenthal for that disaster, another all-and-everything score that was also pompous and unwieldy. The composer's good fortune professionally, to have it recorded by Sony Classical, was his bad fortune artistically, because the work is now remembered as a very low point in Sony Classical's scorched-earth war on good taste, waged with a barbarity that even Grendel could admire.

The new score is much, much better, yet still filled with bad habits. Vocal lines are incessantly doubled in the orchestra, a trick that, if used occasionally, adds intensity and luxury, but when used indiscriminately leaves the singers mired in the morass of instrumental sound. Grendel's lines are the worst, low-lying and doubled by low instruments, and not very interesting. Harmonically, the music is often inert, with the orchestra laying down little swaths of piquant background while the singers pick their way through vocal lines cut from the same basic material. The effect is a bit like photographing people dressed in clothes that are the exact same color as the wallpaper behind them. And the whole thing is essentially monophonic, meaning there's very little contrapuntal interest, no clash of musical lines against one another and very little that goes its own way independent of the orchestral business.

But it is colorful and often dramatic -- forceful percussion passages give scenic climaxes athletic energy. And while thoroughly derivative, Goldenthal borrows well. Vocal lines for the Shaper, a bard sung beautifully by Richard Croft, have Benjamin Britten's delicate fingerprints on them. When Goldenthal strives for something majestic, he begins to channel Philip Glass in one of his hypnotic, wide-horizons moods. And his Hollywood style pokes in from time to time with little melodic tags that always feel like they're from something (which is the essence of the Hollywood style: Even when new it feels familiar but unplaceable).

There were other strong performances. Owens has the stamina of an ox. Dencyce Graves, singing in the subbasement of her mezzo-soprano voice as the Dragon, was sexy and funny and gave the evening much-needed levity. The orchestra, conducted by Steven Sloane, was alert to the pacing and often complex rhythmic demands made by the composer's vocal lines. Among the large cast, standouts included Laura Claycomb's crystal-clear Queen Wealtheow and the sinewy and volatile dancer Desmond Richardson as the embodiment of Beowulf. Angelin Preljocaj's choreography was dynamic and meaningful (a rarity in the opera house), and the small army of designers (puppets, sets, costumes, lighting) created a unified visual feast.

This is spectacle, with adequate music. The creative energy, the initiative, the scope for invention and originality, has shifted away from the composer and into the hands of the director and designers. Which isn't an entirely bad thing. Opera is usually staged by lazy idiots, but with the music of Verdi or Mozart or Strauss coming at you, who cares? The new genus, spectacle-opera, will perhaps force old opera into better theatrical habits. But the musical component is withering, like a vestigial appendage.

If the opera world trends in the Taymor direction, there's good cause for hope. But if it heads in the direction of Goldenthal, the future could be monstrous.

Grendel runs through July 16 at Lincoln Center for the Performing Arts in New York.

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