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Thomas Adès

Powder Her Face, West Edge Opera, Oakland, California — ‘Buoyant, exhilarating’

A fluid revival of Thomas Adès’s ribald and astonishingly precocious 1995 chamber opera



Laura Bohn in 'Powder Her Face'. Photo: Cory Weaver © Cory Weaver

AUGUST 3, 2016 by: **Allan Ulrich**

West Edge, the Bay Area summer opera festival that thrives on challenges, has scored a sell-out success in converting an abandoned Oakland

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Two Proms in which new works were wrapped in a classical package

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transport depot into a fancy London hotel room. This is the setting for the West Coast staged premiere of *Powder Her Face*, [Thomas Adès \(http://next.ft.com/content/3e222760-5571-11e6-9664-e0bdc13c3bef\)](http://next.ft.com/content/3e222760-5571-11e6-9664-e0bdc13c3bef)'s ribald and astonishingly precocious 1995 romp through the career and downfall of Margaret Campbell, Duchess of Argyll. To hear the composer, then 24, sample an array of styles (from Bergian atonalism to dance hall rhythms to neoromantic infusions) in this chamber opera is exhilarating, especially in light of [Adès \(http://next.ft.com/content/3e222760-5571-11e6-9664-e0bdc13c3bef\)](http://next.ft.com/content/3e222760-5571-11e6-9664-e0bdc13c3bef)'s later creations.

Philip Hensher's astringent libretto uses the structure and tone of bedroom farce to offer pertinent observations about the passing of fame by recounting the narrative in flashback in eight scenes; he flouts realism by deploying the singers other than the duchess in multiple roles. Sex and money are the currency of the world and they are ultimately exhausted with grievous consequences, but the single set and the multiple casting assignments keep tragedy at bay.

Powder Her Face has acquired notoriety because of an onstage sex act. The wise director Elkhanah Pulitzer is not reticent about decorously reproducing that moment; she also lards her production with additional carnal encounters and makes them all seem slightly absurd rather than tawdry.

Pulitzer steers her cast with exceptional fluidity, relishes onstage costume changes and keeps it all remarkably buoyant. Conductor Mary Chun draws a robust sound from her 14 players and

— 'Adès's score is brilliant'

Premiered at the Salzburg Festival, Thomas Adès's new opera is musically dazzling

London
Symphony
Orchestra/Adès,
Barbican, London
— 'German
tradition versus
modern brilliance'

The first of two concerts featured romantic violin concertos alongside Thomas Adès's own works

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Thomas
Adès/Gloria
Cheng, Herbst
Theater, San
Francisco — 'A
stunning team'

The duo's piano recital was a fine test of this newly refurbished concert hall

highlights Adès's inventive orchestration with French horns for nostalgic moments and clicking fishing reels for saturnine episodes.

Comprised mostly of West Edge regulars, the cast afforded considerable pleasure at Sunday's opening. Soprano Laura Bohn's duchess nimbly aged a half-century, and found both erotic charm and increasing pathos despite a dry lower register. As sundry maids and reporters, soprano Emma McNairy negotiated Adès's punishing tessitura with sublime ease.

Jonathan Blalock's lyric tenor did well with all the sexy juvenile assignments, while Hadleigh Adams's elegant baritone served as both duke and judges, compact studies in sexual hypocrisy.

★★★★☆ To August 13, [westedgeopera.org](http://www.westedgeopera.org/) (<http://www.westedgeopera.org/>)

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