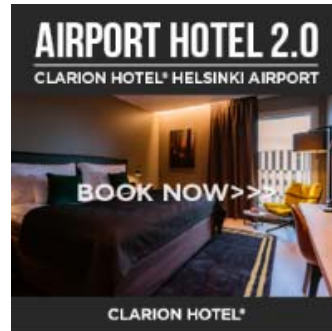




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## Keeping up appearances: *Pelléas et Mélisande* finally receives its Norwegian première

★★★★☆ ?

By Aksel Tollåli, 10 April 2017

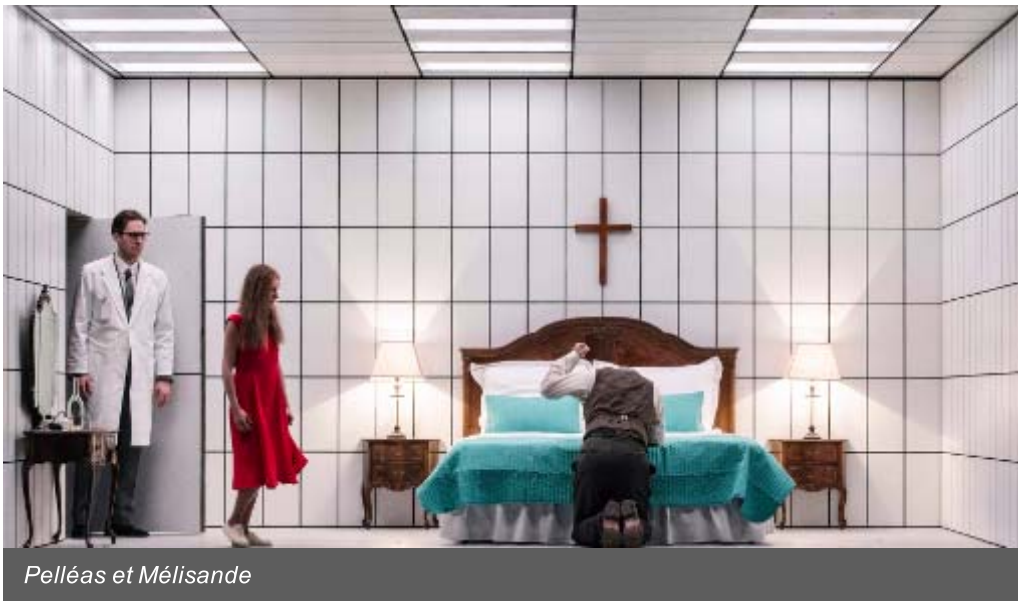
Despite the swanky new opera house on Oslo's waterfront, Norway has quite a way to go, operatically speaking. There is an uncomfortable number of key works that still haven't seen any performances here. One of these key pieces is Debussy's only opera, *Pelléas et Mélisande*. At least it was, until it finally received its Norwegian première in a gripping production by Barbora Horáková Joly, 115 years after its first performance.



Susanna Hurrell (Mélisande) and Edward Nelson (Pelléas)

© Erik Berg

Originally, this production was to be the opera directing debut of Australian director Simon Stone, but he had to withdraw only a few months before opening, leaving the production to Czech director Barbora Horáková Joly. Joly did not seem to have time for the external trappings of the story – this was no medieval fantasy of caves, towers and mysterious heroines with impossibly long hair. Instead, the harshly lit, white tiled hospital walls of Ralph Myers' set became the backdrop of the psychological exploration of a dysfunctional family on the verge of collapse.



*Pelléas et Mélisande*

© Erik Berg

The hospital setting lent the production an experimental feel: even though the central family were always in the foreground, they were always a doctor lurking in the background, observing. Around the central love triangle of Mélisande, Pelléas and his half-brother Golaud, the rest of the family tried to keep it together, with varying degrees of success. As Arkel, the family patriarch, Anders Lorentzson kept his dark bass remarkably beautiful, even as he violently tried to maintain control. Randi Stene's voluptuously sung Geneviève, the mother of Pelléas and Golaud, was walking around in a cognac-induced stupor, teetering on the brink of collapse under her pale gold suit and perfectly coiffed hair. Golaud's son Yniold, unsettlingly beautifully sung by boy soprano Aksel Rykkvin, showed an unhealthy fascination for dolls and archery, the purity of his voice belying his already traumatic upbringing.



Susanna Hurrell (Mélisande)

© Erik Berg

The opera opened with a visibly traumatised Mélisande, her white dress caked with dirt, blood running down the inside of her thighs. There were also splatters of blood on Golaud's shirt, although the reason for the blood was not readily apparent. What followed this opening scene was not a straightforward narrative; rather, events bleed together into a tapestry of confusion and unrest. Joly embraced the episodic nature of the opera, blurring the transitions between scenes and even acts, making them seem like fragmented memories, half lived, half reimagined. Only towards the end did the chronological erraticism begin to make sense, ending with an ambivalent, even borderline frightening image of life to come, despite parts of the audience happily cooing away.

As Golaud, Paul Gay was difficult to discern at first – while he was completely audible, the thickness of his voice muddled his diction. Gay also proved himself a fine actor, especially in his scene with Aksel Rykkvin's Yniold, suddenly lashing out in furious bouts of anger. Making his role debut as Pelléas, Edward Nelson impressed with a ringing baritone, excellent French diction and a surprisingly easy top. His ardent tower scene with [Susanna Hurrell](#)'s Mélisande was a thrill to listen to. Jumping in for the injured Ingeborg Gillebo, Susanna Hurrell's Mélisande started out somewhat cautious, yet her silvery soprano soon opened up, but still with an admirably forceful lower register – she sounded radiant in the Act 4 duet opposite Nelson's Pelléas.



Susanna Hurrell (Mélisande), Anders Lorentzson (Arkell) and Edward Nelson (Pelléas)

© Erik Berg

Despite some flubbed notes in the trumpets and horns, the orchestra played remarkably well under music director Karl-Heinz Steffens. Steffens showed a keen sense of rhythm, yet he let orchestral details shine through, basking in the wealth of orchestral sonorities.

It was about time that *Pelléas et Mélisande* was put on in Norway. Despite the short notice, Barbora Horáková Joly's production proved a fascinating psychological exploration, coupled with excellent singing and luxurious orchestral playing. I just hope it won't be another 115 years before it's done again.

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“Joly embraced the episodic nature of the opera,



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blurring the transitions between scenes”

Reviewed at Oslo Opera House, Main Stage, Oslo on 7 April 2017

PROGRAMME

Debussy, Pelléas et Mélisande

PERFORMERS

Norwegian National Opera

Karl-Heinz Steffens, *Conductor*

Barbora Horáková Joly, *Director*

Ralph Myers, *Set Designer*

Alice Babidge, *Costume Designer*

Edward Nelson, *Pelléas*

Susanna Hurrell, *Mélisande*

Paul Gay, *Golaud*

Anders Lorentzson, *Arkel*

Randi Stene, *Geneviève*

Aksel Rykkvin, *Yniold*

Norwegian National Opera Orchestra

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Aksel Tollåli, 30th January

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★★★★☆☆

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