

Strange tellings of twisted tales

OPERA ON DVD

JOHN TERAUDS
CLASSICAL MUSIC CRITIC

The short, sharp shock can be as effective on stage as a drawn-out epic. Two such works have shown up in new releases this fall, but both DVDs pose a risk for the buyer. The first is a great work made strange, while the second is just strange.

ELEKTRA

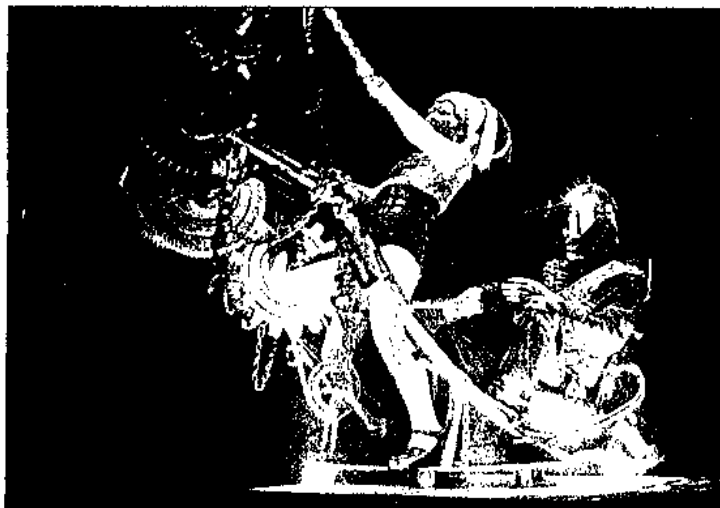
By Richard Strauss
Opernhaus Zurich/von Dohnanyi (TDK)
☆☆☆

This controversial production, presented last year in Zurich, wraps a strong cast and excellent orchestral accompaniment inside a misguided staging.

Elektra, the start of a long collaboration between Strauss and poet/librettist Hugo von Hofmannsthal, is based on Sophocles' play about a dysfunctional ancient Greek family.

Elektra's mom, Clytemnestra, has murdered her husband, Agamemnon, and shackled up with the thuggish Aegisthus. Elektra takes advantage of Clytemnestra's enduring guilt to torment her. When brother Orestes returns, Elektra persuades him to take the lives of their mother and her lover, Aegisthus.

The action unfolds in a brisk 100 minutes. Strauss wields a sharp musical knife, underscor-



A scene from *L'enfant des glaces*, by Quebec's Pauline Vaillancourt.

ing the family torments with a harsh orchestration that reaches an emotional peak after the double murder, when Elektra ironically sings that, in the face of such happiness, all one can do is be silent and dance.

Director Martin Kusej and set designer Rolf Glittenberg have made the multi-doored set feel like the inside of a crazy person's skull, as characters stagger like drunks over the rippled floor.

Elektra (a powerful Eva Johansson) is a bleach-blond street tough wearing two hoodies (one red, of course). Aegisthus (Rudolf Schasching) looks like the leader of a biker gang. The servants act like sexual deviants (for example, the stable

boy appears in a satin *peignoir* and jockstrap).

When a Brazilian carnival dance troupe appears at the point when tears are ready to flow down your cheeks near the end of the opera, all that's left is to wrench the DVD from the player — and scream.

There are no extras, and the booklet has little information.

L'ENFANT DES GLACES

By Pauline Vaillancourt
Chants Libres (ATMA)
☆☆☆

If anyone has any doubts about whether Quebec is a distinct culture within Canada, they should sit down with the work of Robert Lepage, Claude Vivier

and Pauline Vaillancourt.

Through her company, Chants Libres, Montreal-based soprano/performance artist Vaillancourt, now 61, has spent much of her career finding new ways to express drama in music and other media.

In this 2000 co-production with the Musée d'art contemporain de Montréal, Vaillancourt uses the discovery of a 500-year-old child found preserved in ice in the Andes as a jumping-off point for a meditation on where our civilization is going.

Vaillancourt calls the work an "electr'opera." It's nearly impossible to understand what is going on on stage, but what we see is fascinating.

The singing is done by Vaillancourt and Jean Maheux, and their voices are digitally altered in real time by Zack Settel, who also manages the accompaniment/background noise. Vaillancourt also directs and helped create the scenery (with the help of Martin Boisjoly).

Visually and aurally, this short opera (less than an hour long) is mesmerizing. But in taking on such a broad theme as human existence, Vaillancourt leaves us no character with whom to bond, and no story to follow.

It is inexcusable that the DVD does not include an explanatory featurette or even a booklet. The DVD is also missing a label, which could spell disaster in a pile of loose discs.

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