

The leading lady, Israeli soloist Merav Barnea in the entire run of 'Wozzeck' in her stride

BY J. LENKINSKI

One reason why opera productions have double casts for vocal chords being vulnerable in operas being marathon performances usually require a day of rest. Employer of some of the finest singers, the Israel Opera takes this seriously. However, in show business, expect the unexpected.

Upon opening its production of Alban Berg's, sans one leading lady. Upon a Tuesday evening, Swiss soprano Barnea did an about-turn and moved to European safety. She was cast in the role of Wozzeck's lover/wife, Marie, half going to Israeli soloist Merav Barnea. It takes days to go before opening, and she had to ask Barnea to forgo her status and take on the entire run of 10 performances.

Barnea, a woman, with piercing baby blue eyes, a smile. She took this change of pace as a very un-diva-esque attitude. "It's long but it isn't long," she said. "I squeezed orange juice in Tel Aviv. There are many breaks, so there is time to focus on the coming scene. In an example," she explained, "my legs are on stage for an hour and a half. So while performing in all of this, a challenge, I think it's man-

aged on Georg Buchner's play, is a crazed barber who slaughters Marie in a hallucination-driven rage. Contra, *Wozzeck* was Alban Berg's opera, staged in 1925.

Barnea is willing to take on *Wozzeck* is her intimate knowledge of having played Marie in Europe, and the role seems like a reunion.

Barnea said. "She's a hungry woman with a fuller life. She's dependent on her in any way. There are so many things that are so relevant today."

Barnea visited her mother, Ruth Dan. This engagement, her return to Israeli stages after her absence, has been filled with unexpected joy, in spite of all current events, to be back at home, near her family, in theaters where her career offi-

Barnea said. "I am thrilled to be back in Israel, especially for this reason," she said. "I think this is a beautiful production."

Alpha and Omega, by Israeli conductor and composer Gil Shohat, was Barnea's breakthrough production. Staged in 2001, the opera created a splash, which has continued to ripple for over a decade. Given the leading role, Barnea shined, attracting the attention of critics, directors and producers both in Israel and abroad.

In the years since her Israeli debut, Barnea moved to Germany and gave birth to three little girls. She has taken on complicated roles in operas such as *Tanhauser*, *Elisabeth*, *Macbeth* and *Tosca*. Though each character has her own distinct qualities, Barnea has been able to pinpoint the common threads in the roles she embodies.

"Do we choose the part or does the part choose us?" she asked. "I'm not a typical opera singer. I enjoy doing roles that give me a rainbow of emotions to work within. I think that in most of the roles I do, the part fulfills a theatrical need that is beyond the musical need of the piece. I think that me and Marie match and that I am doing the parts that I am supposed to be doing."

At this point in her career, Barnea realizes that she has crossed a certain line with regard to her perspective on performance. Having spent years honing her craft, Barnea was finally able to dispense with her need for technical perfection to make room for fuller expression.

"I always wanted to be a good soldier on stage. Then I grew up and I realized that I'd never be able to do that. There are many opera singers who see themselves as a tool and not as creators themselves. But I am not an instrument, not because I didn't want to be but because I tried that path and discovered that it wasn't me. I always wanted to be like everyone else and in the past two or three years I understood that I couldn't fight myself. My path will never be 'normal.'"

In *Wozzeck*, Barnea brings her theatrical charisma into full realization. This is both due to her skills as an actress and to the unique set of circumstances in the production. German director Manfred Beilharz has intentionally left the set design minimal, setting *Wozzeck* apart from many more visually dazzling productions. The space left open by props is filled with the emotion of the singers.

"Beilharz wants those big operatic gestures, but because the stage is so clean, there's room for them. This production really respects the singers and the music. And I believe that the contrast between the somewhat classical costumes and direction with the sparse visual makes it very relevant for today," said Barnea. "So many opera productions are full of elements that are meant to make the show more attractive to the audience. Opera directors are obsessed with making the experience of seeing an opera as engaging as a movie. And often, they forget what's really important. Here, that's not the case," she said.

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Wozzeck will run at the Tel Aviv Performing Arts Center from November 27 through December 7. For tickets, visit www.israel-opera.co.il.

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Un-diva-ish
Israeli soloist Merav Barnea takes 'Wozzeck' in her stride

Crossword Puzzle 22-23 | Arts & Ent 24



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