



Features

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Salvaging the Savaged

This summer, Santa Fe Opera presents a new staging of Gian Carlo Menotti's *The Last Savage*, which was considered an ignominious failure at the time of its Met premiere in 1964. **BARRY SINGER** looks at the reasons why the opera was dismissed by critics.



Beni Montresor's Met production of Menotti's opera, with (clockwise from bottom) Peters, Lili Chookasian as Maharanee, London, Nicolai Gedda as Kodanda and Morley Meredith as Scattergoodv

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Few operas of the late twentieth century were greeted with greater ridicule than Gian Carlo Menotti's *The Last Savage*. The French newspaper *Le Figaro*, in reviewing the work's world premiere in Paris at the Opéra Comique on October 21, 1963, had many terrible things to say, but there were two words that summed it all up — "a misery." The U.S. premiere at the Met three months later, on January 23, 1964, fared no better. "*The Last Savage*," stated *Time* magazine, "requires a better-natured audience than a composer can expect to find in all Christendom."

Ridicule, at birth, is not necessarily the kiss of death for an opera. A select few have more than outlived their opening fiascos: *La Traviata* and *Madama Butterfly* come quickly to mind. For most operas, though, ridicule sticks. One has to admire, then, or at least marvel at, Santa Fe Opera's audacity in bringing *The Last Savage* back, with six performances beginning July 23, starring Anna Christy and Daniel Okulitch. One also has to ask: why?

"Well, it is Menotti's centennial," replies general director Charles MacKay, by phone from Santa Fe. "And his *Help, Help, the Globolinks!* did have its American premiere here in 1969, so Menotti had connections to Santa Fe."

Yes, but why *The Last Savage* — of all Menotti's operas?

"It fills a big gap," answers MacKay, with plain-spoken practicality. "We're going from *Faust* to *Wozzeck* this season. I felt we needed a comic opera in our theater, and ideally one in English. When you think about it, there are not many American comic operas. *Candide* is one of the few that come to mind. It, too, had a pretty rocky beginning, by the way, which it has obviously overcome. I just think it's important to revisit contemporary works that were not necessarily well received. *The Last Savage* is wonderfully lighthearted and very melodic. Another draw for me is the current nostalgia for the 1960s, with *Mad Men* and so on. This is a very period '60s piece. Even better, it pokes fun at the '60s — modern art and all. I just thought we could have fun with it."

Menotti conceived *The Last Savage* as a "grand opera

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Allen Moyer's costume design for Abdul in Santa Fe Opera's new production

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buffa" and wrote the broadly satirical libretto himself in Italian, his native language, despite the fact that his commission had come from the Paris Opera, which ultimately passed the piece on to the Opéra Comique, for which it was translated into French. Menotti's original title was *L'Ultimo Superuomo* (The Last Superman). This was changed before the premiere, emerging in George Mead's English translation as *The Last Savage*.

It's hard to say whether the story itself is better seen or just heard, but it certainly begs description. Kitty, an ambitious young Vassar anthropology student, comes to India looking for the earth's "last savage" — the topic of her graduation thesis. Her parents, an American millionaire and his wife, are more interested in marrying Kitty off to the Maharajah's son, the Crown Prince of Rajaputana, but Kitty refuses to cooperate until she finds her savage. Her parents then hire a local peasant named Abdul to play the part for a \$100,000 payoff. Kitty captures Abdul and brings him back to America, intending to present him to the New York Zoo. On the trip home, though, she grows fond of her savage and decides to keep him. Her attempts to civilize Abdul end in a King Kong-like show-and-tell for a cocktail party full of movers and shakers that goes predictably wrong. Abdul wrecks the place and runs. Months later, Kitty discovers him living savagely and happily in a jungle cave. Declaring her love, Kitty joins him. The curtain falls on the two wrapped in a primitive embrace while, in the background, Kitty's father's flunkies can be seen delivering a bathtub, a television and a refrigerator to the cave.

Menotti's music is not nearly so goofy as this. Characteristically tonal, if somewhat derivatively melodic (redolent, in fact, of Leonard Bernstein's pastiche score for *Candide*), it has nuggets of beauty, lush orchestrations and an impressive final-act septet. In 1963, Menotti's detractors took offense at what had long since become their usual knee-jerk package of objections — too conservative, too facile, too tritely melodious. As had become his habit, Menotti responded vigorously, in print, in his own defense: "To say of a piece that it is harsh, dry, acid and unrelenting is to praise it. While to call it sweet and graceful is to damn it," he wrote in *The New York Times* just days before the Met premiere. "For better or for worse, in *The Last Savage* I have dared to do away completely with fashionable dissonance, and in a modest way, I have endeavored to rediscover the nobility of gracefulness and the pleasure of sweetness.... Too many people still mistake gloom and complexity for profundity."



Allen Moyer's costume design for the Maharajah

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Allen Moyer's costume design for the Maharajah

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Roberta Peters and George London, above, as Kitty and her "savage," Abdul, at the Met in 1964
Louis Melançon/OPERA NEWS Archives

The Met gave *The Last Savage* everything it could — a starry cast that included Nicolai Gedda, George London, Lili Chookasian, Roberta Peters and Teresa Stratas, and a stupendous set by Beni Montresor. It then milked the production shamelessly, including a New Year's Eve performance that employed the opera's cocktail-party scene to bring on guests, *Fledermaus* style, with Met general manager Rudolf Bing introducing Leontyne Price, who sang "Vissi d'arte" from *Tosca*.

"It was a lot of fun," eighty-nine-year-old Lili Chookasian recalls today, laughing. "There were those who did like it and those who didn't. Some people thought it wasn't the appropriate thing. I thought, why not? Would I go see it again myself now? I don't know what else anybody could do with it. We were so well set in our parts. I still can't get over George London doing what he did as the Savage. It was so unexpected. He was so reserved, a delightful person with that gorgeous, gorgeous voice, but I couldn't picture him being the Last Savage. They put him in a cage. It was quite astounding."

The years following *The Last Savage* were not happy ones for Menotti. Prolific as ever, he continued to produce operas — *Martin's Lie* in 1964, *The Most Important Man* in 1971 — that did nothing to shore up his declining reputation. Only *Help, Help, the Globolinks!*, his 1968 children's opera, was received with anything approximating a critical embrace. "As composer Gian Carlo Menotti speaks, a sense of disillusionment hovers over him," a *New York Times* profile of the composer began in 1974, a perception Menotti readily confirmed. "Whatever happens in my

career or in my life never surprises me anymore," he conceded. "I've become a man without illusions."

Menotti revised *The Last Savage* for a 1973 production presented by Hawaii Opera Theatre that he also directed. The opera was then revived at his own Spoleto Festival USA in 1981 in honor of the composer's seventieth birthday. Charles MacKay was there. "I worked at the Spoleto Festival then," he recalls. "What I remember so well was the audience reaction. People loved it."

In fact, some critics also greeted Spoleto's *Last Savage* with appreciation. "A witty satire on today's civilization and society is at the core of Menotti's story and music," wrote *The Washington Post*. "It is hard to see how this production would be anything but a smash hit. The text, largely in rhyming couplets, takes aim on the pomposities of what is called 'culture' by the snobbish elements in the arts, but does it with wit and grand humor. More important, the music is some of the most sophisticated and ingenious in the entire Menotti repertoire."

"Look," MacKay points out, "Menotti was a great man of the theater. He was a fine director, a two-time Pulitzer Prize-winner as a composer. People forget. He also was one of the first new-media opera composers, in that his operas appeared on television and on radio at a time when that was as revolutionary as streaming opera online or HD is today. I worked with him for a number of years at the Spoleto Festival. In fact, if you want to know a secret, I also operated a follow spot on that 1969 production of *The Globalinks* here."

So what does MacKay think went wrong the first time around with *The Last Savage*? "Perhaps it was an opera before its time. It's hard to write a contemporary satire," he says. "It may be easier to view the 1960s through the lens of 2011. Menotti could also be his own worst enemy when it came to the critics. He did not pull his punches. People always knew what he thought of them." □

BARRY SINGER is writing a new book, to be published next year, entitled *Churchill Style: The Art of Being Winston Churchill*.

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