

'The Rosenbergs' is a grand story on the small stage

By Keith Powers, Correspondent

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BOSTON - Opera comes in many sizes. On one end, there are the grand-stage, orchestra-in-the-pit, audience-in-Sunday-best operas. On the other, a few singers in a room, with a piano.

In between there's chamber opera - a modest amount of instruments, a small cast of singers, simple sets. This version can be the most accessible, and the most rewarding. "The Rosenbergs (An Opera)," onstage now at the Boston Playwrights' Theatre, proves it.

The BPT stage could hardly be smaller, but was only asked to accommodate a cellist, pianist and violinist—as well as two hard-working singers, Christie Lee Gibson, realizing the role of Ethel Rosenberg, and Brian Church as her husband Julius.

Forgotten the Rosenbergs? In the Cold War era there was no more galvanizing story than the trial and subsequent execution of the accused spies.

It was a simpler story back then. The left thought the Rosenbergs were victims of the McCarthy witch hunt, aimed at rooting out communists. The right thought they were treasonous, having sold the secrets that allowed the Russians to get the bomb.

Subsequent years have clouded that narrative considerably, but composer Joachim Holbek and librettist Rhea Leman's opera has little to do with those facts. Indeed, "fiction of facts" is a recurring idea in the production, which was directed with probing insight by Dmitry Troyanovsky.

Love dominates this story. Gibson and Church have the stage to themselves, alternating between pushing the narrative, and revealing their characters.

Well-developed scenes start in the mid-1930s, with the couple's initial, tender, romantic encounter, and culminate with the moment before their electrocution in 1953. In between, the focus remains on the relationship - not an easy thing to accomplish, with the accusations and tribulations that

swirl around them.

The stage is spare, and the color palette - nearly everything is gray - matches. Chairs serve as symbolic properties - an indication from the very first moments of the couple's eventual fate. The floor of the stage is covered in soft, deep dirt - at first a curiosity, but over time proving its function. It forced the characters to move about deliberately, matching the movement to the contemplative nature of the storyline.

Gibson (soprano) and Church (baritone) both sang forcefully. Not all of the part sat comfortably in Gibson's instrument, but most of her singing - especially in the challenging low range - was touching and natural. Church owned his role, and sang with ease and conviction.

Both acted superbly, in punishing roles. There is very little physical action, but they moved organically about the small stage - Troyanovsky's blocking (aided in choreographic direction by Susan Dibble) played a large part in the visual success.

The libretto carried the story along. The Rosenbergs doomed love story could easily turn maudlin, but this never happened. They are believers - in themselves, and in their cause - and strive till the end. We believe along with them, aware of the outcome.

The instrumentalists - pianist Nathan Urdangen, cellist Miriam Eckelhofer and violinist Abigale Reisman - occupied a corner of the stage, but were less involved in the acting that would be expected. Holbek's score was tuneful and appealing, capturing the essence of the characters, maintaining a period quality, and rarely drawing attention to itself.

The instrumental trio also faced demands - onstage the entire time, playing a through-composed score with no breaks. Given the music's continuous quality, and the challenging amount of timing in the accompaniment - Urdangen doubled as conductor when necessary - there were slips in certain sections. Some of the string intonation missed its mark. Overall the playing was impressively enthusiastic and engaged.

The nature of Holbek's score - unobtrusive, tense but never overtly dissonant - mirrored Leman's libretto. She told the story of how they met, fell in love, dreamed and died. The harrowing politics, the unfair accusations, the bitter result - these aspects of the Rosenbergs story were adjacencies, always there, shadowing the couple, but never the focus.

This opera was about Julius and Ethel. Gone, and somewhat forgotten.

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