

## PRAGUE POST Around Town

### Budget Mozart remix

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The triumphs and travails of mounting a theater production in Prague were never better on display than this past Sunday night, when *Don Juan in Prague* played at the Estates Theater as part of the Strings of Autumn festival. A Czech-American co-production, the opera is an updating of Mozart's classic *Don Giovanni*, re-imagined and directed by the talented American producer, director and writer David Chambers.

*Don Juan* featured a dazzling cast of American and Canadian singers in equally dazzling costumes, performing on a brilliant vertigo-inducing set that neatly captured Prague past and present. The music, reduced to a chamber score for five musicians, was provided by Prague's Agon Orchestra, which sounded excellent. And the female lead (Donna Elvira) was sung by Iva Bittová, who reminded locals why she's a rising star in world music.

Bringing any production of *Don Giovanni* to the hallowed stage where it premiered is a bold move, much less a modernized version. But this production is intelligent, provocative and respectful, updating some elements (like the recitative, done in English slang with phrases like "Give it a rest!") while preserving the core music and story line. The house was packed and there was near-unanimous praise for a fresh take on Mozart — no easy feat in this anniversary year.

What most of the audience didn't know was that the production had come perilously close to not playing at all. Chambers had been visiting Prague for more than a year doing recruitment and rehearsals, and the Strings of Autumn organizers had labored mightily to win the support of the staid National Theater. But when Daniel Dvořák, the theater's limelight-loving director, was purged last month, the new administration had orders to slash budgets.

One obvious place to start was *Don Juan*, an experimental work. Killing it would have been like double death to Strings of Autumn, which got thrown out of its home at Prague Castle three years ago when the Klaus administration blew out all the cultural activities that had been nurtured by Havel. But as Strings' Artistic Director Marek Vrabec says, "It's not in my nature to cancel."

So Vrabec and his partner Dana Syrová huddled with theater administrators and managed to keep *Don Juan* on the schedule, but not with the financial

and technical support originally promised. As a result, a truncated version played here — minus about 20 percent of the set (which came from the States), according to associate producer Younghee Kim-Wait, and a running complement of video projections.

The cuts also limited rehearsal time, so that the first opportunity the cast and crew had to practice on set was the day before the performance. Not surprisingly, problems arose, some seemingly insurmountable. "I went home very depressed Saturday night," says Vrabec.

But none of that was in evidence at the glitzy, high-spirited reception after the performance. Asked privately how he felt, Chambers said, "Greatly relieved!" But then he stepped to the microphone like a trouper and graciously thanked everybody and said all the right things about the magical experience of bringing *Don Juan* to its birthplace.

The production now moves to the States for performances at the Brooklyn Academy of Music. There's talk of bringing it back to Prague for an extended run in a year or two, though it's hard to imagine the producers wanting to risk again what they went through this fall.

As for the remaining five concerts on the Strings of Autumn schedule, they should be easy after the angst-inducing *Don Juan* — or so it seems to an outsider. Tell that to Vrabec and he smiles and shakes his head no. "You can never relax," he says.