

Creatures in the water main

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In recent decades conventions drawn from cinematic genres have had their own quiet effect on the nature of operatic productions. While the ‘body-horror’ subgenre may seem too reliant on quick edits and special effects to be translated effectively to the stage, director Kornél Mundruczó offered a credibly nightmarish version in the fascinating – and occasionally frustrating – new production of *Rusalka* at the Staatsoper Unter den Linden. The oddities of the staging were mirrored in the performances, which placed a generally strong cast – led by Christiane Karg and supercharged by Mika Kares and Anna Kissjudit – against musical direction (from Robin Ticciati) that often seemed indifferent to the beauty and nuance of Dvořák’s score. If the resulting evening was somewhat uneven it was, at the very least, never dull.

Mundruczó,
Rusalka
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**Berlin, domingo,
4 de febrero de
2024.** Staatsoper

Unter den Linden. Dvořák: Rusalka. Kornél Mundruczó, director. Christiane Karg (Rusalka), Pavel Černoch (Prince), Anna Samuil (Foreign Princess), Mika Kares (Water Goblin), Anna Kissjudit (Ježibaba), Adam Kutny (Gamekeeper), Clara Nadeshdin (Kitchen Boy), Regina Koncz, Rebecka Wallroth, Ekaterina Chayka-Rubinstein (Wood Sprites), and Taehan Kim (Hunter). Staatskapelle Berlin. Robin Ticciati, conductor

The character of Rusalka belongs to a distinguished line of water spirits whose attempts to live a happy life are thwarted by treachery of human passions. For all its elements of folk mythology it is not a tale that needs to search very far to find modern relevance and, for Kornél Mundruczó, it provided a solid foundation for the story of a socially-awkward girl in present-day Berlin who assumes a new identity – in this case a pale, silent goth – to win the affections of the badly-dressed trust-fund hipster who lives in her building, only to be rejected in favour of someone from the hipster’s own bourgeois milieu.



Dvořák: Rusalka. Robin Ticciati, conductor. Kornél Mundruczó, director. Berlin, Staatsoper Unter den Linden, February 2024. © 2024 by Gianmarco

The first two acts made their critique of modern Berlin more through sets and costumes than actions. Rusalka’s domain, a disorderly semi-squat occupied by a dishevelled middle-aged burn-out and three free-spirited young girls, was just one floor down from the converted Dachgeschoss with expensive light fittings and views of the Fernsehturm where the Prince and his obnoxious entourage hung out. In its contrast between the unreconstructed ‘old Berlin’ and the encroaching gentrification of the twenty-first century, the staging occupied a territory not far removed from the Staatsoper’s (magnificent) 2018 production of *Falstaff*; if it seemed less

essential to the story of *Rusalka*, the familiar setting and its attendant social worlds nonetheless offered a clear illustration of the uncrossable gap that separated the water spirit from her prince. With the exception of a few eels fished out of the toilet by Ježibaba during *Rusalka*'s transformation, there was little in the first act-and-a-half to suggest that the staging was going to be anything more than a class tragedy.

The eels, however, proliferated in the evening's second part (the interval occurred around three-quarters of the way through the second act, presumably to keep the supernatural elements out of the first half; it was a decision that made sense dramatically but not musically). A long rubbery eel emerged from a painting to entangle the prince at the conclusion of the second act and buckets of rubbery eels fell from the ceiling onto the prince's entourage as they sought the help of Ježibaba; most significantly *Rusalka* herself went through a partial metamorphosis between the second and third acts and was, in the final scenes, part eel herself. The eel costume, intended perhaps to look like something out of H.R. Giger, resembled an articulated puffer jacket in full light, but was far more convincing when shrouded in fog and darkness; it was too well-executed to be ridiculous – the fact that it didn't undermine the final scene is a tribute to its success – but not quite disgusting enough to be genuinely disturbing.

If the sudden shift from cultural critique to body horror was something of a curveball, it also transformed the staging into something considerably more interesting than anything promised by the first two acts. Indeed, much of the action in the first part had a disconcerting awkwardness, a handling of characters that seemed wilful but ever so slightly off. The 'ballet' of the second act – essentially *Rusalka* flailing her way through the prince's empty flat – ramped up the awkward to the point where there could be no doubt that it was intentional, even if it never entirely justified itself. In the face of such calculated discomfort, the obvious horrors of the third act came as something of a relief.



Dvořák: *Rusalka*. Robin Ticciati, conductor. Kornél Mundruczó, director. Berlin, Staatsoper Unter den Linden, February 2024. © 2024 by Gianmarco Bresadola.

One could not help but feel sorry for Christiane Karg, who was forced to give a performance of unreasonable physical intensity – which included crawling around on stage dragging a giant eel costume behind her – while delivering a role that demands considerable delicacy of voice. Did she know what she was getting into? Nonetheless it was a remarkable performance: within the ostensible realism of the opening acts there was not a scene in which her unmoored persona didn't throw things intriguingly off-balance; yet in the supernatural third act she approached *Rusalka*'s change of physical circumstance with a bearing that made the whole thing seem strangely plausible.

Ms Karg was able to match the physical demands of the role with a vocal performance that built in intensity as *Rusalka*'s plight grew more desperate. Her Song to the Moon, which alternated passages of beautiful rhapsodic flow with moments of deep introversion, didn't quite receive the orchestral accompaniment it deserved; by the time *Rusalka* had recovered her voice at the end of the second act, however, Ms Karg had introduced a new level of

dramatic immediacy. The lament that opens the third act, despite a hint of strain in the lowest passages, was gripping in its delineation of the tragedy, and her contributions to the final scene were forceful and frequently radiant.



Dvořák: *Rusalka*. Robin Ticciati, conductor. Kornél Mundruczó, director. Berlin, Staatsoper Unter den Linden, February 2024. © 2024 by Gianmarco Bresadola.

The evening's finest performances, however, belonged to Mika Kares and Anna Kissjudit. As the Water Goblin, Mr Kares was a continual delight, delivering his scenes with absolute clarity, arresting fullness of tone and boundless lyrical warmth. The character may be given to reprimanding Rusalka for her poor life choices, but Mr Kares ensured that even his most critical moments contained deep undercurrents of sympathy. His second-act solo scene was among the finest moments of the evening, and his subsequent reunion with Rusalka was infused with graceful melancholy; but when he let the Water Goblin's full anger take hold – as he did in his magnificent third act curse of the prince's retinue – the results were no less striking.

As Ježibaba Anna Kissjudit was impressive both for her tonal range and the dynamism of her performance. If her transformation of Rusalka had a note of the cartoon witch, her subsequent outlining of the curse that would follow if Rusalka failed to find love on land was deadly serious, delivered with an intensity that elevated the scene into one of the first act's most compelling moments. Even at her most over-the-top – cackling madly or hurling rubbery eels at the prince's friends – she maintained such tight control over the character that what could have turned into lazy comedy retained an unmistakable air of menace.

Pavel Černoch's Prince had the staging working against him – the character was presented, from the outset, as deeply unsympathetic, and subsequent appearances only reinforced a general lack of redeeming features – but a number of his scenes never quite took off: one wanted greater ardour in his first encounter with Rusalka, and a more forcefully-argued sense of doubt in the second act might have given the prince's infidelity a sturdier dramatic foundation. Yet in both of these scenes the pacing of the orchestra seemed at odds with Mr Černoch's conception of the character, and the final scene, in which he and Ms Karg were locked into their own dynamic, was notably more successful.

Indeed the musical direction of Robin Ticciati was highly variable throughout the evening; his reading seemed governed by a spirit of precision and economy that often ran counter to the strands of earthy vigour and luminous beauty that dovetail throughout Dvořák's score. There were a handful of climactic moments that impressed by virtue of their abrupt force, but numerous passages that moved the action forward with little attention to the opera's capacity for lush romanticism. Certainly anyone hearing *Rusalka* for the first time on this evening might not have been convinced that it is a work equal in stature to Dvořák's final symphonies or late tone poems.

However if the evening had its moments of frustration – both musically and theatrically – these were generally outweighed by the conviction of the central performances and the wealth of memorable imagery. The grotesque elements of the staging may have been

designed to appeal to a younger audience brought up on the visceral thrills of body horror, but the logic that ran beneath the action yielded a cohesive retelling, in which supernatural elements emerged as a necessary amplification of *Rusalka*'s very human tragedy.

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