

# OPERA NEWS

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## *Aging Magician*

**SAN DIEGO**  
**San Diego Opera**  
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**I**T WAS AN ODD COINCIDENCE that the same week the San Diego Opera presented the *Aging Magician* at the Balboa Theatre, the U.S. marked one million Covid deaths.

The innovative music theater work, co-created by composer Paola Prestini, librettist Rinde Eckert and director and co-designer Julian Crouch for a consortium headed by Beth Morrison Projects, was originally scheduled for March 13, 2020 at San Diego's Balboa Theatre. That, however, was the week Covid started shutting everything down and the performance was put on hold.

Two years later, we are tentatively emerging from the fog of Covid, scarred, uncertain, ready to go on, but undeniably changed, and not necessarily for the better. *Aging Magician* has re-emerged as well, opening May 13 at the Balboa Theatre with the same cast and creative team that presented the work in New York at the New Victory Theatre in 2017 and was headed for San Diego in 2020.

The unavoidable juxtaposition of *Aging Magician* and the age of Covid made this fantastical work seem a bit like a period piece—that is, the period before Covid. There's not a moment of anger, cynicism or doubt in *Aging Magician*. There's plenty of uncertainty as to the exact nature of the ultimate outcome, but there's never any question that life is good, and the universe is benevolent.

Eckert's imaginative libretto tells the story of a clockmaker (the opera's single character, also portrayed by Eckert) who is writing a book about an "Aging Magician," a figure indistinguishable from the clockmaker himself. Early in the production, the Magician collapses and is taken to the hospital where he is on the brink of death. ("Hold on ... watch his levels," the members of the superlative Brooklyn Youth Chorus" chorus sing, "we don't want to lose him before we've begun.")

We follow the Magician, through the person of the clockmaker, on a time-traveling, stream-of-consciousness train ride to his final destination, where the back of the stage opens revealing a wondrous machine with gears and levers and wheels whirling around. Somehow, the clockmaker becomes part of the clock-like contraption, as Crouch and Amy Rubin's set fades into the stars and the chorus sings "Watch him vanish into the heart of the clock, into time." And we do. And perhaps we feel transported as well.

Eckert was a goofball at times, a guru at others, but always compelling and often surprising. With an accordion present on stage the whole time, you figured Eckert would play it at some point, but you didn't expect his accordion solo to be one of the opera's musical highlights.

Prestini's eclectic score, expertly realized by Eckert, the chorus and the Attaca Quartet, ranged from chant-influenced passages to thorny patches of dissonance, moving from background to foreground and back again. At times you forgot there was a score; at other times, like that accordion melody, it was unforgettable.

Eventually, the accordion tosses the plaintive theme to the string quartet, and as the Magician approaches his final stop on this wild ride, the members of the chorus come down from their risers and pick up the pieces of paper strewn on the stage (he's a writer, after all). Some of young singers form the sheets into birds, others create a life-size likeness of the Magician. But when they present it to him and he reaches over and touches it, it falls apart into pieces.

The whole presentation was so innocent, so imaginative, so nurturing, so charming, so beautiful, that my cynical, post-Covid sensibility tried to resist. But we all have our place in the universe, in the present moment, and perhaps beyond. As the Magician discovered, and we along with him, resistance is futile. —*James Chute*