

MUSIC REVIEW

New Turns on That Trip to Ithaca
Opera Omnia Takes 'The Return of Ulysses' on a New Route



Julietta Cervantes for The New York Times

Opera Omnia Jesse Blumberg sings the title role in this production of "The Return of Ulysses," at Baryshnikov Arts Center.

By JAMES R. OESTREICH
Published: September 11, 2013

Can this be New York, that notorious backwater of early music?

Connect With Us on Twitter

Follow @nytimesarts for arts and entertainment news.



Arts Twitter List: Critics, Reporters and Editors

Arts & Entertainment Guide

A sortable calendar of noteworthy cultural events in the New York region, selected by Times critics.

Go to Event Listings »

With the new season barely begun, New Yorkers have already seen two small-scale but notable productions of Monteverdi operas in less than a month: 'L'Incoronazione di Poppea,' staged by the Dell'Arte Opera Ensemble in August, and 'The Return of Ulysses,' presented by Opera Omnia at the Baryshnikov Arts Center on Tuesday evening. And both had heavy involvement of players from the Sebastians, a fast-rising group of period-instrumentalists that opened its own season with a lively concert on Saturday.

Opera Omnia, which began life in 2008 with its own production of 'Poppea,' has been content to develop slowly: 'The Return of Ulysses' ('Il Ritorno d'Ulisse in Patria') is only its third production, after Cavalli's 'Giasone' in 2011. In extensive program notes for 'Ulysses,' Avi Stein, the music director; Crystal Manich, the stage director; and Wesley Chinn, the producer, espouse an equal concern for music, words and drama, and a desire to connect to audiences through, among other things, the use of an English translation made for the English National Opera by Anne Ridler.

- FACEBOOK
TWITTER
GOOGLE+
SAVE
E-MAIL
SHARE
PRINT
REPRINTS

Log in to see what your friends are sharing on nytimes.com. Privacy Policy | What's This? Log In With Facebook

What's Popular Now

How to Fall in Love With Math



Gunman and 12 Victims Killed in Shooting at D.C. Navy Yard



MOST E-MAILED

MOST VIEWED



1. OP-ED CONTRIBUTOR How to Fall in Love With Math



2. DNA Double Take



3. BITS Disruptions: Minecraft, an Obsession and an Educational Tool



4. THE STONE The Banality of Systemic Evil



5. In Pursuit of Tastier Chickens, a Strict Diet of Four-Star Scraps



6. FRANK BRUNI Hard Truths About Our Soft Bodies



7. Can Emotional Intelligence Be Taught?



8. THE GREAT DIVIDE Lifelines for Poor Children



9. Harvey's Injury Shows Pitchers Have a Speed Limit



10. Antibiotic-Resistant Infections Lead to 23,000 Deaths a Year, C.D.C. Finds

Go to Complete List »

Show My Recommendations

“Not everyone has read Homer’s epic ‘The Odyssey,’ ” Ms. Manich writes, “nor should they have to before attending this performance.” Yet what the program book failed to provide was any kind of synopsis, an odd lapse in a production of such high quality.

The opera is a loose assemblage of incidents from the second half of “The Odyssey” in three acts, running more than three hours. The producers cut it to two acts and two hours, and made other changes, like transforming a scene for two minor characters into a Prelude for Ulysses and Penelope on their wedding night. Thus there is a prelude before the Prologue, in which the gods Time, Fortune and Love confront human frailty, setting the tone for the drama. Then it is back to the palace, with Penelope lamenting the absence of her husband, before the gods Neptune and Minerva and an array of lesser characters parade through the action.

The cuts affect balances in the drama. In an otherwise fast-paced second act, you had no reason to want to spend so much time with the glutton Irus on his way to his suicide: no reason, that is, apart from the fine singing of Joseph Gaines.

And the vocal performances were in general excellent. Jesse Blumberg was compelling as Ulysses, throwing himself into the role physically as well as vocally. Hai-Ting Chinn was affecting as Penelope, singing beautifully after a bout or two of wayward pitch in her opening lament.

Ms. Manich’s staging was imaginative, freely mingling modern and antiquarian touches in the sets and costumes, and making clever use of shadow play. The orchestra of eight, conducted by Mr. Stein from the harpsichord, played with spirit and polish once past some confusion in the violins at the start.

It was a fine evening but undoubtedly a long one — cuts or no — for listeners new to the opera and left to their own devices to follow its sketchy progress.

*“The Return of Ulysses” will be repeated on Thursday evening at the Baryshnikov Arts Center, 450 West 37th Street, Manhattan; (646) 731-3200, bacnyc.org.*

A version of this review appears in print on September 12, 2013, on page C7 of the New York edition with the headline: New Turns On That Trip To Ithaca.

SAVE E-MAIL SHARE

Try unlimited access to NYTimes.com for just 99¢. [SEE OPTIONS »](#)

#### Get Free E-mail Alerts on These Topics

[Opera Omnia](#)

[Baryshnikov Arts Center](#)

[Music](#)

[Classical Music](#)

#### INSIDE NYTIMES.COM



##### OPINION »



Op-Ed: Let the Poor Have Fun

##### BUSINESS »



Wooing, and Resenting, Chinese Tourists

##### WORLD »



Army and Christians Tread Carefully in Egypt

##### SCIENCE »



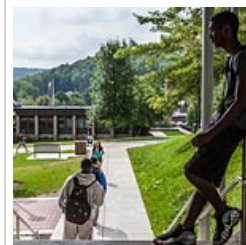
The Rational Choices of Crack Addicts

##### OPINION »

### If the State Department Eclipses the Pentagon

Room for Debate asks what is lost when the secretary of state takes the lead in calling for military intervention.

##### N.Y. / REGION »



A Town-Gown Clash Over Public Services