

Pure opera magic

Nushin Elahi previews the Met's latest season of live opera films, which opens next weekend in South Africa, and reviews the opera Eugene Onegin

Pushkin's famous novel was translated by Tchaikovsky into soaring emotions in his opera *Eugene Onegin*, and this production in the hands of Russian conductor Valery Gergiev and Russian soprano Anna Netrebko is pure magic. Netrebko's letter scene in Scene 2 alone is worth the price of the admission, as the young Tatiana pours out the wild feelings Onegin has ignited in her.

The story tells of a country girl who falls passionately in love with the suave friend of her coquettish sister's beloved, a poet. The shy teenager spends a long night writing down her newly awakened feelings and sends the letter to Onegin, who gently tells her he cannot return her love, or be bound by the chains of domesticity. A fight later ensues between the two men when Onegin flirts with her sister, Olga, and the poet is killed in a duel. Years later Onegin returns to St Petersburg to find Tatiana now a married society belle, and he tries unsuccessfully to capture her heart.

It's not surprising that this opera has been a favourite with Russian audiences since its 1879 premiere. The music is glorious and rich, filled with wonderful arias.

The two younger male leads are Polish and the prince, Tatiana's

husband, is powerfully sung by Russian bass Alexei Tanovitski, who had only moments on stage to convey this older man's fine character. Mariusz Kwiecie, as Onegin, reprises a role he has sung often before, but in this reading he is less arrogant than many, and the scene where he rejects Tatiana's love is done without callousness, but rather tender regret.

Piotr Becza plays the poet, Lenski, with an endearing charm, contrasting well with Oksana Volkova's vivacious Olga. The



Oksana Volkova as Olga and Piotr Becza as the poet Lenski in Eugene Onegin

scene where he foresees his death is moving.

The amazing Netrebko is the star of the show, taking Tatiana from the hesitant stirrings in her heart to the elegant and adored wife, who turns her back on the passion for which she once

yearned. It is obvious that this is a character deeply rooted in the singer's background and we experience the anguish as Tatiana chooses duty over love.

A nuanced reading of all the characters brings the turmoil of their lives to the fore. Ensemble

scenes dazzle with a gorgeously costumed chorus. The staging, though, is at times clunky, with long intervals as the rather boring set is changed. This stretches the opera to almost four hours, but the stars are so amazing one is lost in the beauty of the music.

New York's Metropolitan Opera begins its 2013/14 season of *The Met: Live in HD* next weekend in South Africa. A season of 10 works, it opens with two very different Russian operas: Tchaikovsky's romantic tragedy *Eugene Onegin*, on Saturday, November 9, followed on November 30 by a reprise of South African artist William Kentridge's production of Shostakovich's *The Nose*.

Eugene Onegin marks the Met debut of director Deborah Warner, one of three British directors to have new productions this season. The opera was a co-production with the English National Opera in London, but was fraught with backstage drama, as Warner had surgery and was replaced by her long-time collaborator, British actress and

director Fiona Shaw. Sung here in its original Russian, the Met production has a Russian conductor and a host of Russian singers, including soprano Anna Netrebko. Opening night in New York was marked with protests about Russian President Vladimir Putin's laws against gays.

South Africans have seen Kentridge's productions on stage, but this dazzlingly innovative production of *The Nose* took the Met by storm at its premiere in 2010. The opera is based on Gogol's comic tale of a hapless Russian bureaucrat who wakes up one morning to find his nose has run away. It stars Tony Award-winner (*South Pacific*) Paulo Szot.

This season marks the return of Met

music director James Levine, who conducts Mozart's *Così fan Tutte* (May 24) and a new production of Verdi's comic opera *Falstaff* (January 18). Levine made his debut at the Met in 1971, and celebrated 25 years of working there before ill health made him withdraw from music two years ago.

Other highlights include Renée Fleming in her signature role of Dvořák's water nymph *Rusalka* (March 8), an all-Slavic cast in a new production of Borodin's *Prince Igor* (March 29) and the classic Franco Zeffirelli production of Puccini's *La Bohème* (April 26). In *La Cenerentola* (June 7), Joyce DiDonato makes her role debut at the Met, and bel canto master Juan Diego Flórez is her dashing prince. Also new this sea-

son is British director Richard Eyre's production of Massenet's tragic romance *Werther* (April 5).

The Met: Live in HD was launched in 2006 with the aim of making opera accessible and affordable to all. Seven years on, it broadcasts to nearly 2,000 cinemas in 64 countries and reaches more than 3 million viewers.

The full 2013/14 line-up: *Eugene Onegin* (Tchaikovsky) November 9; *The Nose* (Shostakovich) November 30; *Tosca* (Puccini) December 7; *Falstaff* (Verdi) January 18; *Rusalka* (Dvořák) March 8; *Prince Igor* (Borodin) March 29; *Werther* (Massenet) April 5; *La Bohème* (Puccini) April 26; *Così fan Tutte* (Mozart) May 24; *La Cenerentola* (Rossini) June 7.

A sense of Austen, but film lacks the sensibility

STEPHANIE MERRY

JANE AUSTEN inspires imitation. Her early-19th century romantic novels have defied time, with adaptations ranging from *Clueless* (based on *Emma*) and *Bridget Jones's Diary* (*Pride and Prejudice*) to a series of novels that depict her as a vampire. Add to the list *Austenland*, a novel by Shannon Hale adapted for the big screen courtesy of first-time director Jerusha Hess.

Keri Russell stars as Jane Hayes, a Mr Darcy fanatic who spends her savings on Austenland, an immersive holiday experience in the British countryside that promises to transform participants into Austen's great heroines, complete with empire-waist gowns, needlepoint to pass the time and love interests, played by actors. (But "no touching," insists

unhinged Austenland proprietor Mrs Wattlesbrook, played by Jane Seymour.)

Upon arriving, Jane is put in the servants' quarters, given that she can afford only the budget package, and dressed in dowdy duds, while the other guests are lavished with fine gowns and ostentatious accommodations. But fancy dresses are nothing compared with love, and Jane finds herself with more than she bargained for, even though it's difficult to discern how much is real and how much is scripted. She catches the eye of not only the handsome Darcyesque Mr Nobley (JJ Feild), but also the good-natured Martin, a farmhand played by Bret McKenzie.

In other words, the movie has an Austen-like plot about an Austen obsessive. And while Hess laboriously checks off so many famil-



Jane Hayes (Keri Russell) is a Mr Darcy devotee who saves up her money for a Jane Austen-inspired trip in which she gets more than she bargains for, romantically in Austenland.

iar scenarios, from characters caught in rainstorms and upper-class idiots blathering on about nonsense to an

awkward moment at the pianoforte, the film doesn't have so much of what makes Austen transcendent. In place of sharp witticisms, we have Jennifer Coolidge, playing rich guest Elizabeth Charming, who tries to get into the spirit by aping an English accent and yelling "tally ho".

But, more important, there's no spirited heroine. Jane Hayes isn't sassy like Elizabeth Bennet or warm like Emma Woodhouse; she has neither the vivaciousness of Marianne Dashwood nor the clearheaded logic of her older sister, Elinor. She's nice, sure, but she's also kind of a caricature. Instead of character development, the film offers a montage of over-the-top scenarios in which Jane forces a disinterested date to watch *Pride & Prejudice*, and kisses her life-size cardboard cut-out of Colin Firth as Mr Darcy. The often brilliant

Russell seems to embrace the role with tepid enthusiasm.

The plot feels tenuous and disorganised but also strangely predictable. Whenever Jane takes her leave from the other guests and actors, it's clear she will immediately run into Martin. And as soon as she bids Martin adieu, she will no doubt cross paths with Mr Nobley. And although there's an attempt to throw a twist into the story, it's readily apparent from the beginning.

If nothing else, *Austenland* is a reminder of what continues to make the trail-blazing author so wonderful. No matter how bleak things seem, Austen's characters always manage to find a euphoric and contagious happiness. And that kind of feeling needs to be earned. It can't be replicated with a checklist of plot points. — The Washington Post