

South African artist and director William Kentridge is at the helm of the upcoming Met Opera: Live in HD production of 'The Nose', which opens in South African cinemas next weekend. Nushin Elahi went to a screening of this highly praised comic opera



The chorus hunt down the Nose in a scene from Shostakovich's opera of the same name.

PICTURE: KEN HOWARD/METROPOLITAN OPERA

THE NOSE. It must be the most unromantic title for an opera, or a story for that matter, because Shostakovich's opera started out as a short story by Gogol. It's an unromantic opera. But it's clever, crazy and utterly zany. This Russian classic is essentially the magic of making comedy out of nothing. In the Met Opera's production, South African artist and director William Kentridge proves himself a master at creating that magic, too.

In an arena where great staging is the norm, this production stands out as an artwork in itself. Kentridge's incredible visual lexicon submerges the audience in the world of the absurd. The opera may be titled *The Nose*, but it's really about the hapless Russian bureaucrat Major Kovalyov, who finds himself without a nose one day and is led a merry dance trying to get his appendage returned.

The score allows us to enjoy the major's agonies of embarrassment, the baker's fear when he finds a stray nose in one of his loaves, the police who apprehend the nasal scoundrel and the townsfolk who

Overwhelming absurdities

discuss the merits of the story.

Kentridge, however, gives us the full drama of the epic journey this escapee takes, creating a visual score that places the Nose centre stage at all times. In fact, although the movie focuses on the stunning cast of singers, I am sure that sitting in the opera house in New York, you could find yourself distracted by the wanderings of the Nose. There are times when the singers will be in what seems a teeny room against a massive ex-

panse on which the Nose takes wing as a ballerina, or rears up on a horse.

It is no wonder that opera-goers were bowled over by this production when it debuted in 2010. Kentridge has always proved himself an innovative theatre director, and his productions such as *The Tall Horse* or *Woyzeck on the Highveld* are legendary for their fantastic effects. Here he has chosen a work which is ideal to be teased into a sensory feast, with all the political

imagery that has always underscored his work. Shostakovich's music reflects the disjointed era he is depicting, and Kentridge uses a vast array of imagery from early Soviet modernism as his visual notation.

Instead of simply creating a backdrop to the opera, this is an animated film that accompanies the work. Using a base layer of old Russian encyclopaedias as the stage curtain, letters and symbols doodle across the set, gathering into one image then collapsing into something else. Russian writing criss-crosses the scene, while black and white images of people are stamped with a bright red cross, or perhaps a dunce hat.

The Nose, as Kentridge explains, he modelled on his own statuesque feature. For him the tale explores the split within ourselves, "those parts that resist control by others", paralleled by the artist's lack of

control over his creations.

Sung by Australian Alexander Lewis, the Nose gets only a single aria. However, it keeps wandering across this gloriously absurd backdrop that sees a newsroom teetering precariously amid reels of newsprint, Kovalyov's tiny room a pinprick of light against the vast nightscape, and the city folk a mad assortment of colourful characters.

Kentridge's imagination seems to know no bounds as he amplifies the crazy story on a visual level that opens the opera to engage the audience cerebrally in a wild non-stop two hours.

This isn't a work to transport you emotionally, as the productions before and after this one are, but it stays with you in a very different way. The boisterous energy in Shostakovich's music makes great demands of the cast, but they hold their own in the midst of this dazzling visual display. The chorus are wonderfully crisp as they mirror the questions and comments that will buzz in your head as the saga unfolds.

Paulo Szot has great presence as the unfortunate Kovalyov, whether bemoaning his fate or feverishly trying to attach the Nose again. His powerful voice resonates with the frustrations of a man caught in the disjointed web of a nightmare.

Opposite him are some wonderful roles, among them the women who may have put a spell on him, the manic doctor and particularly Russian singer Andrey Popov's ferocious police inspector, who needs a bribe to return the errant Nose to its rightful owner. Also Russian is conductor Pavel Smelkov, who throws himself into the mayhem of the time.

Kentridge's visual treat is an opera experience unlike any other; and South Africans should delight in seeing what had jaded New York opera goers cheering wildly.

The Nose opens at Cinema Nouveaus nationwide on Saturday, December 1, 3, 10, 11 and 12

Middle-aged romance rendered with soft warmth

ANN HORNADAY

WRITER-DIRECTOR Nicole Holofcener isn't as much of a known brand as Woody Allen, but she deserves to be.

For the past 17 years, Holofcener, who got her start as one of Allen's apprentice editors, has been making smart, sharply observant comedies about women and their relationships that manage to be both warmly amusing and stingingly on-point.

Now, with *Enough Said*, Holofcener has made her most winning and widely accessible movie to date, the perfect film to satisfy fans as well as initiates who are new to her singular brand of droll, self-aware insight.

Lucky them. Such Holofcener classics as *Walking and Talking*, *Lovely and Amazing*, *Friends With Money* and *Please Give* still await, the better for their deliciously sardonic takes on friendship, family and class anxiety to deliver wallops of astonished, gratified recognition.

Happy-sad is the fact that *Enough Said* marks one of the final appear-

ances by the late James Gandolfini, here playing a frumpy, overweight academic named Albert who embarks on an awkward romance with Eva (Julia Louis-Dreyfus), a masseuse who, like Albert, is the divorced parent of a teenaged daughter about to leave home for college.

After a near-disastrous first meeting at a cocktail party, Albert and Eva begin dating, their simpatico senses of humour bouncing off each other with spontaneous, almost telepathic ease and barely masking mutual anxieties regarding intimacy, independence, fragile self-worth and spreading middle-aged bodies.

Thoroughly banishing any remaining vestiges of Tony Soprano, Gandolfini comes utterly disarmed to a role that he tackles with superb sensitivity and naked vulnerability. A bearded, sweet-natured butterball of emotional need, he both absorbs and deflects Eva's spikier energy, which Louis-Dreyfus softens considerably by way of self-deprecating wit and her expressive face.

Louis-Dreyfus takes on duties as Holofcener's surrogate that in past



The late James Gandolfini plays a frumpy, overweight academic named Albert who embarks on an awkward romance with Eva (Julia Louis-Dreyfus), a masseuse who, like Albert, is the divorced parent of a teenaged daughter about to leave home for college in *Enough Said*.

movies most often have fallen to Catherine Keener. Here, Keener has a juicy supporting role as Marianne, a New Agey vegan goddess with whom Eva strikes up a friendship while she's courting Albert. It turns out that Louis-Dreyfus is the perfect foil for Holofcener's often painfully self-conscious brand of chamber

comedy, lending daffy relatability to an enterprise that could easily succumb to the solipsism of first-world problems and unexamined privilege.

At its best, *Enough Said* captures middle-age romance in a way that's never forced, even when the film's central plot twist comes fully into play.

At that point, *Enough Said* enters fully into screwball territory — in both the antic and sophisticated sense of the term. Like the best romantic comedies of Hollywood's Golden Age, Holofcener's film zings and pops with hilarious dialogue, but also gets to the heart of human nature: in this case, the lengths people go to in order to fill their empty spaces, and how lovable foibles become intolerable flaws.

In its own tough way, *Enough Said* posits that we largely have ourselves — or at least the stories we tell ourselves — to blame when that happens. But thanks to Gandolfini's and Louis-Dreyfus's radiant, quietly courageous central performances, viewers won't feel accused as much as understood when they see themselves in Albert's self-defeat or Eva's self-deception.

And thanks to Holofcener's generous and compassionate heart, they'll feel forgiven even as they wince in recognition. Feisty, funny, fizzy and wise, *Enough Said* sparkles within and without, just like the rare gem it is. — The Washington Post