

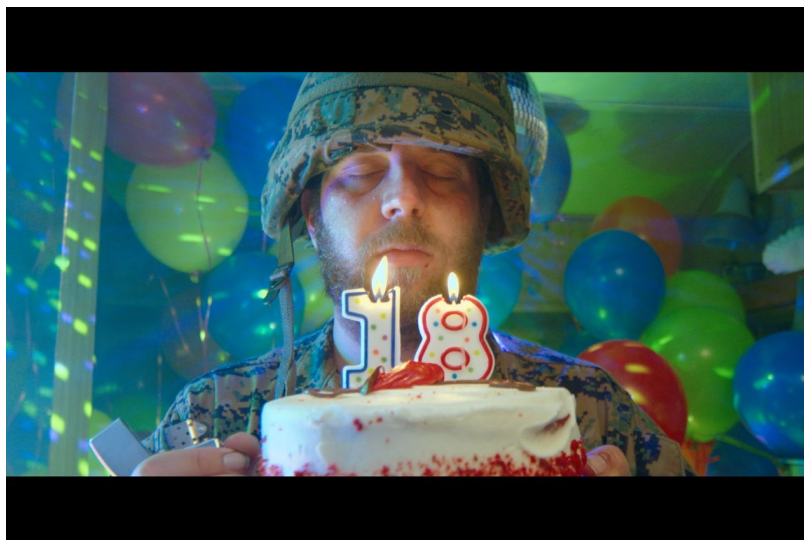
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## OPERA REVIEW

# 'Soldier Songs' and 'Titon et L'Aurore' Reviews: War's Wounds and Love's Arrow

A dark opera explores the mind of a veteran with post-traumatic stress disorder; a pastoral comedy features earnest lovers, meddling gods and sheep puppets.



Johnathan McCullough in 'Soldier Songs'

PHOTO: OPERA PHILADELPHIA

*By Heidi Waleson*

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**Operas directed** especially for film have been an intriguing artistic byproduct of the Covid-19 pandemic, opening new interpretive avenues. A case in point is the movie of

David T. Little's "Soldier Songs," created for the [Opera Philadelphia Channel](#). The film makes this 2006 monodrama even more powerful than it was as staged theater. It is an immersive experience that takes the audience on a terrifying dive into the mind of a veteran with post-traumatic stress disorder.

As directed and performed by baritone Johnathan McCullough, with a screenplay by James Darrah and Mr. McCullough, the veteran lives in an Airstream trailer marooned in an otherwise empty field. His home is an encampment, and all the details—the "Don't Tread on Me" flag outside; the bleak, claustrophobic interior with a constantly operating coffee maker and a handgun on the table—scream isolation and tension. Mr. Little based the libretto of "Soldier Songs" on interviews with friends and family members who served in conflicts from World War II to Afghanistan. Their recorded spoken accounts serve as an essential element in its musical texture, along with the baritone solo part and a small, percussion-driven instrumental ensemble. In the film, the camera's multiple perspectives add still more layers of meaning and sensation, and accentuate the violent, repetitive quality of the score.

The tight dramatic arc starts with a shot of the open field (there's a distant booming sound that could be gunfire) before the camera zeroes in on the trailer and its occupant. We see what's happening inside the veteran's head as he relives his experiences. He plays at war—as a child with toy soldiers and as an adolescent obsessed with violent videogames—and then segues into the real thing, blasting Metallica "to keep me entertained" while driving a tank. Sometimes it's now; sometimes it's then; like the soldier, we're never entirely sure. The trailer's window becomes the tank window; burning toast creates a cloud of smoke that becomes a bomb explosion, as Mr. McCullough tumbles out the door in battle gear and cries "Somebody yell cut! This movie is out of control."

## "Titon et L'Aurore"



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After that, I certainly needed some comic relief, which was amply supplied by a new production of Jean-Joseph Cassanéa de Mondonville's "Titon et L'Aurore" (1753) from the Opéra Comique. Paris is on lockdown, so the show had only one performance this month, with no audience—the singers and players supplied the applause for one another at the end. The video is available free of charge on Medici.tv through April 19.

This delicious bonbon is served up by director Basil Twist, famed for his work with puppets, with music direction by the great William Christie leading his period-instrument ensemble Les Arts Florissants. It's a pastoral entertainment with lots of dances and a simple plot: The shepherd Titon and the goddess L'Aurore (Dawn) are in love; a pair of jealous gods, Éole (god of the winds) and Palès (goddess of shepherds), resolve to separate them. Happily, Amour (Love) prevails.

Mr. Twist's direction and design reflect the airiness of the piece with billowing fabrics that evoke fire and wind, L'Aurore's iridescent golden dress and Amour's silver 18th-century court costume, all made vivid by Jean Kalman's colorful lighting. Puppets are central in the numerous dances, beginning with the Prologue, when earthen statues are brought to life. As befits a pastorate, puppet sheep play a major role. Palès has a fleecy train and pair of sheep companions. Mr. Twist brilliantly builds the comedy, with new sheep for each dance, in the extended scene in which Palès tries to seduce Titon into infidelity. Her ovine companions stand up and dance, other sheep appear in tilting stacks, and still more romping beasts descend from the flies. You can't keep from laughing.

Standouts in the excellent cast include Gwendoline Blondeel, whose opulent soprano brings warmth and richness to L'Aurore, and Emmanuelle de Negri, a comically vicious Palès (listen to her snarl "*haine*"—hatred). Julie Roset is a bright-voiced Amour, especially able in the ornamented passages. As Titon, Reinoud Van Mechelen comes into his own in his celebratory final aria; Marc Mauillon could use a bit more vocal weight as the nasty Éole, but his revenge duet with Ms. de Negri is a high point. Mr. Christie's orchestra sparkles throughout, and their speedy double-time repeats add to the show's emphatic embrace of fun.

—Ms. Waleson writes on opera for the Journal and is the author of "*Mad Scenes and Exit Arias: The Death of the New York City Opera and the Future of Opera in America*" (Metropolitan).