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MOVIES

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○ **IN PERFORMANCE: CLASSICAL MUSIC; Bleak 'Rigoletto,' Sparing No Details**

By ANNE MIDGETTE

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New York City Opera

New York State Theater

Lincoln Center

Men are horrors, and women are victims. Rhoda Levine's "Rigoletto," which returned to City Opera on Saturday, creates a bleak, unrelieved world. In leaving nothing to the imagination, it delivers not a tolerant portrait but a severe indictment of the Duke and his would-be killers. Thus you see Monterone's dishonored daughter in the first scene, mocked by the Duke who has just ravished her. Thus you see, in the last scene, every mundane detail of Gilda's murder.

Contrasting with this harshness is the aural opulence of the orchestra as led by Willie Anthony Waters, making his company debut -- belatedly, to judge from the authority and power he showed here. The opening chords sounded veritably Wagnerian, and yet Mr. Waters never masked the singers. His reading was simple, unfussy and so compelling that it kept seducing the ear, placing the evening's musical focus in the pit rather than on the stage. An additional highlight was the outstanding men's chorus.

The evening's other debut was that of Luz de Alba Rubio, a Uruguayan soprano, as a girlish Gilda with a fluttery vibrato and comfortable high notes, held out in true Golden Age opera style. As Rigoletto, Louis Otey was ardent and moving. His baritone showed blemishes on sustained notes, which had a sandpaper thinness as if threatening to crack, but he sang his way into a powerful performance in the second half of the opera.

Raúl Hernández, the Duke, has a light and pleasant tenor, here at the limits of its abilities. Peter Volpe was dry and strained as Sparafucile. ANNE MIDGETTE

Photo: Louis Otey and Luz de Alba Rubio in City Opera's "Rigoletto." (Sara Krulwich/The New York Times)

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