

John Lindsay-Botten plays Pierre Elliot Trudeau in George Elliott Clarke and D.D. Jackson's opera based on the charismatic former prime minister. Trudeau: Long March/Shining Path is on at the Dunn Theatre, Dalhousie, until Sunday.(Eric Wynne / Staff)



Opera shines a light on Trudeau

Performances even out after starting slightly out of sync

By STEPHEN PEDERSEN

Pierre Elliot Trudeau was an enigmatic, mercurial politician and a bit of a mystery to us all.

George Elliott Clarke and D.D. Jackson's opera on Trudeau as a cosmopolitan world traveller is a mix of biography and fantasy. It casts a light around Trudeau and may make us wiser — or not.

Clarke is a poet and the opera is a poetic take on Trudeau's encounters and conversations. It is based on his visits with some of his era's most successful revolutionaries: Mao Zedong in China, Fidel Castro in Cuba, Nelson Mandela in Africa.

Jackson has written a jazzy, stylistically flexible score that emphasizes the lightness and wit with which Trudeau suffered fools and wise-men. It also underscores Trudeau's political ideas, theory and practice, as well as his kaleidoscopic relations with beautiful women.

That's a lot to do in two hours with a cast of six, a piano trio (with bass and percussion), minimalist sets and costuming.

It didn't quite come off during Wednesday night's opening performance in the Dunn Theatre. It felt as though the performers hadn't quite gotten a feel for the theatre's tricky, onstage acoustics. Voices and band were out of balance at times.

But it was a near miss. The trio over-powered all but the strongest singers in the first act. After intermission the balance improved exponentially and what the production did achieve was interesting, absorbing and entertaining enough to make it very likely to regain its focus as the run to Sunday night's closing show continues.

John Lindsay-Botten as Trudeau captured the flippant manner of Canada's most controversial prime minister while showing enough of the steely intellect behind it to round out the characterization.

Ross Thompson, with his powerful voice, portrayed the uncompromising but by no means stupid Mao as well as the more genial Castro. In yet a third role, Thompson's portrays an FLQ activist spitting out his hatred for Trudeau. He played it with such emotional intensity that the scene was one of the most dramatic moments in the opera.

But the vitriol earned him only a "fuddle-duddle" from his target and an unambiguous order to shove off from Troy Adams as Roscoe Robertson (a character loosely based on jazz pianist and friend of Trudeau, Oscar Peterson).

Adams metamorphosed from Castro's side kick Neruda, to Roscoe Robertson and Nelson Mandela.

Janice Jackson, who produced the show, sang the tricky role of Margaret Trudeau. She bantered with Trudeau in Tahiti and battled him in Rideau Hall. Her soliloquy about getting no satisfaction wittily referenced her notorious association with members of the Rolling Stones.

She gave the opera its most poignant moment as she sat in a chair upstage with a baby swaddled in her arms and sang a quasi lullaby about the snowflakes drifting down on Christmas Day as Falling Stars.

Karen Myatt and Megan Johnson's soft voices suffered most from the imbalance problems in the first act. But their brief moments as Chinese poet Yu Xuanji (Johnson) and Quebec journalist Simone Cixious (Myatt) were telling and their roles as foils for the amorous Trudeau convincing.

Trudeau: Long March/Shining Path, in a somewhat epic-theatre series of vignettes, is thought-provoking and entertaining at different times, but never less than absorbing.

The play runs nightly in the Dunn Theatre at 8 p.m., ending Sunday.