

DIALOGUES OF THE CARMELITES

Poulenc

"Dialogues of the Carmelites" has its genesis in a historical event. During the Reign of Terror following the French Revolution, when the Catholic Church was considered as much an enemy of the Republic as the nobility, a small group of Carmelite nuns were guillotined for the crime of being nuns.

One member of the convent, Mother Marie, managed to escape and published an account of the Carmelites' martyrdom in 1836. A century later, her memoir inspired a novella by Gertrud von Le Fort that Bernanos adapted into a screenplay, then a stage play, which ultimately served as Poulenc's libretto.

There is little doubt that all saw parallels between the Reign of Terror and the myriad horrors of Nazism. But the striking thing about "Dialogues of the Carmelites" is how personal a story it is, as if each person who comes in contact with this tale, saw themselves in it, all too clearly.

Thus, Blanche de la Force (Jee Hyun Lim) could be anyone looking for a way to escape the dangers of the modern world. The daughter of the noble family, she is sensitive & high strung, fearful of everything outside the insulating comfort of the family home. That is why, despite the objections of her father (David Evitts) and brother (Gregory Schmidt), she decides the only way to insure her piece of mind is to cloister herself away as a Carmelite nun.

Once she is accepted into the order, Blanche quickly realizes that the convent's walls can not keep out the thing she fears the most – death. Her relentless cheerful friend Sister Constance (Cheyl Parrish), talks enthusiastically about martyrdom and about a vision she had that she and Blanche would die together. And Blanche is present as the Old Prioress (Rosalind Elias) succumbs to age and illness, her faith seeming to fail her as she rages against a God who at the moment seems aloof and uncaring.

The political unrest in France grows worse, so that Blanche's brother tries to urge her to leave the convent, but she refuses. When the convent is stormed by a mob & the nuns arrested, they take a collective vow of martyrdom – a decision that so panics Blanche that she runs away to hide in the ruins of her family's house.

But when sentence against the nuns is passed, and they calmly, one by one, walk to their fate, Blanche returns to join them one last time.

"Dialogues of the Carmelites" is a most unconventional opera. There is only one musical passage that could be called an aria, when new Prioress, Madame Lidoine (Caroline Whistant) makes her first address to the nuns. There are no melodies that linger in the mind, no moment where time stops for the singers to indulge in some vocal fireworks.

Yet the music is undeniably lovely, and grows more conventionally lyrical as the opera progresses. In that sense, Poulenc's music serves as a kind of counterpoint to the

action on stage. In the opening scene, as the Marquis and Chevalier de la Force discuss Blanche's state of mind, this relatively tranquil domestic scene is accompanied by the most agitated music of the evening. Conversely, the brutal percussion of the guillotine blade in the final scene hardly interrupts the nuns' serene, yet implacable rendition of the "Salve Regina."