

Review: An Opera Erases and Rewrites the American Myth

“Sweet Land” is a parable of, and fantasia on, Manifest Destiny, performed outdoors at a richly suggestive site.

BY ZACHARY WOOLFE MARCH 9, 2020



Kelci Hahn as Makwa in the Industry’s production of the new opera “Sweet Land.” Credit: Casey Kringlen for The Industry

A light-rail train barrels along the curving west edge of Los Angeles State Historic Park, a spit of land here just north of Chinatown. It roars by so close that it feels like the audience watching “Sweet Land,” the bewildering, ghostly new opera being put on in the park, could reach out and nearly touch it.

The train becomes almost a character in the opera. You feel a rush of anxiety and thrill every time the tracks start whistling. And the cacophony of each brief passing both overwhelms and underlines the “real” performance.

As it kept whooshing past last weekend, I started to think about who was inside and who was driving. Where was it coming from? Where was it going?

These are also the questions raised by “Sweet Land,” a parable of, and fantasia on, Manifest Destiny and the colonization of America, that “sweet land of liberty.” The work captures — with a poetry that’s stern yet colorful, oblique yet blunt — the uneasiness of our past and future as a nation defined by brutal oppression and pervasive cultural mixing, and by a history that’s been painfully selective about what it remembers.

“Sweet Land” is the latest endeavor of the Industry, the Los Angeles company founded by the director Yuval Sharon and dedicated to an alternative vision of opera. Its productions sprawl well clear of traditional theaters. “Invisible Cities” (2013) was heard over headphones in Union Station, performed by singers indistinguishable from ordinary travelers. “Hopscotch” (2015) put musicians and audience members into 24 cars driving around downtown.

Different people had vastly divergent experiences of these pieces, which asked how much of any performance is defined by the perspective from which it’s consumed. And by the environment in which it takes place: next to that barreling Gold Line train, when it comes to “Sweet Land,” in a park recently built on land that was once acorn fields, a Tongva settlement and a rail yard, near which Chinese men and boys were killed in a 19th-century lynching.

It’s a richly suggestive site for a reflection on the winning of the West, a story that is really many stories, variously exposed and submerged. To tell them, or at least evoke them, “Sweet Land” has enlisted an unusually large group of central collaborators: a pair of directors (Mr. Sharon and Cannupa Hanska Luger); composers (Raven Chacon and Du Yun); and librettists (Aja Couchois Duncan and Douglas Kearney).

Coming from different ethnic, racial and artistic backgrounds, they offer a sort of American utopia: a panoply of traditions that intermingle — to the point that it’s hard to tell one contribution from another — even as each retains equality and integrity.

The audience enters the park and is ushered toward a theater, one of three roughly constructed, temporary open-air structures built for the production. Through a scrim, there’s a dim view of the northern side of the park, still a construction site, and the bridge beyond over the Los Angeles River. Musicians lightly tap on metal. Individual voices — chanting, ululating, cracking, squealing, howling — gradually emerge over speakers, as does a soft, smooth choral harmony underneath.

Here, the opera’s first part, “Contact,” establishes the rough outline of the stylized, mythlike story, told with gnomic economy. A group of Arrivals, singing a blurry version of a religious hymn, comes ashore amid a blast of electronic noise and quivering flute. They are greeted as guests by the native Hosts.

The audience is separated into two tracks — “Train” and “Feast” — each of which has a dedicated in-the-round theater and a separate story. (Over a pair of performances, I was able to experience both.) “Train” is like an abstraction of missionary-driven westward expansion; an ominous drone is punctuated by ripples of percussion as the Hosts teach the Arrivals words and skills. There is building; there is a murder.

“Train” suggests the rape of a land, and “Feast,” the rape of a woman: At a Thanksgiving-like banquet, the music light and flickering, a cowboy-cocky member of the Arrivals, singing Baroque-pastiche countertenor lines, claims one of the Host women as his bride.

Both tracks come together outside in the chilly darkness for “The Crossroads,” before splitting again for “Train 2” and “Feast 2.” Time has moved forward during the interlude. The “Feast” banquet is now a catering hall, complete with chafing dishes, for the wedding of Arrival and Host, and the desperately brassy “Train 2” conjures the chaotic world of contemporary consumerism, mounting to cries of despair from both voices and orchestra. Then the audience reunites back in the “Contact” space for the final part, “Echoes and Expulsions.”

All this, in barely 80 minutes. Despite the ad hoc architecture and the D.I.Y. aesthetic — particularly the costumes, a mixture of neon knits and thrift-store finds — there’s a sense of extravagance in the marshaling of dozens of artists and so many technical challenges for something that passes so quickly.

Quickly, yet in epic style. I’ve rarely taken in a work that’s so grandiosely modest.

The vocal lines tend toward passionate extremity as the instruments seethe underneath. Our guides throughout are two figures, both called Coyote: part-human, part-animal, part-eternal beings who communicate in nearly wordless moans, hums, cackles, clicks and giggles. They take center stage in “The Crossroads” alongside the evil spirit Wiindigo.

As projections play on a mist of water, their voices rise to a guttural roar before Wiindigo chokes out the phrase “Go back to where you came from,” perhaps American racism’s most notorious line — given darkly witty dual meaning here as an instruction for the audience to return to the theaters.

The weakest part of “Sweet Land” is the first: “Contact,” much of which takes place behind that scrim, is musically and dramatically murky. Is some incoherence the point as we begin this disorienting journey? If so, it was unsatisfying; while the piece hardly gets clearer as it progresses, its enigmas grow to feel more intentional and beautiful.

But if the opening is unsteady, the ending is a miniature masterpiece. For “Echoes and Expulsions,” the scrim has been pulled aside, revealing rough country. A child plays (works?) in a ditch (grave?). Voices of the past are heard as if coming out of thin air, chanting in overlapping chorus: stories of a Pomo girl and a Greek immigrant, that 1871 Chinatown lynching and segregated medicine. The words are projected on surfaces all over the wasteland, enlivening even the bridge in the distance.

Finally, a single voice is left, singing “the sweet land” over and over. The sad, curling melody, like a memory of a hymn, bleeds into the child’s quietly forlorn cry, and Coyote, howling at the moon.

There are no curtain calls, as if the work, as it ends, has really vanished. Vanished into an uncertain future: “Sweet Land,” and the spiffy park itself, are symbols of urban renewal and also, inevitably, avatars of gentrification. You can almost hear in the music the rising rents and displacements coming nearby.

The temporary structures in which it’s being performed will be gone in a week or so. Then there will be no trace that an opera was ever put on here. Yet another event on this land, to be remembered and forgotten.