



OREGON ARTSWATCH

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Beautiful and uncanny: “The Fall of the House of Usher”

OrpheusPDX closes its inaugural season with chills and goosebumps.

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OrpheusPDX's 2022 production of "Fall of the House of Usher." Photo by Owen Carey.

After seeing the terrific *L'Orfeo* ([see my review](#)) earlier this summer produced by the new opera company, [OrpheusPDX](#), I expected the best from their second production, *The Fall of the House of Usher*, on Aug. 28, the final day of the four-performance run at Portland State University's [Lincoln Hall](#).

And I got the best, if most of the characters were lifeless and unsympathetic, the house was creepy, and I felt edgy most of the time—part of the opera’s aim. A doctor (**tenor Scot Crandal**), who sang a few lines and dutifully doled out pills and sedative shots to the burned-out protagonist Roderick Usher (**tenor Steven Brennfleck**), brought back thoughts of crushed entertainment genius Michael Jackson and his drug-addled life. As another tortured entertainer in the spotlight, closeted gay actor Roderick lives a divided life, in which he can’t feel free to be himself.

The atmosphere projected a sad and frayed view of Hollywood refugees—though the window-filled Mid-Century-Modern house, swimming pool that shared an edge with the orchestra pit, and distant mountains conjured up glamor and the good life. Still, the see-through curtains were often closed, barely obscuring what went on inside. Credit goes to set designer **Daniel Meeker** and lighting pro **Connie Yun** for precisely shaping these details. Even Brennfleck as the doomed and depressed onetime movie star, pitch-perfect in all aspects, looked as if he had 5 o’clock shadow at the dismal end. Lighting? Maybe, or just well planned on Brennfleck’s part, who doesn’t miss a beat.

If most of the characters were without conviction, the cast portraying them was full of life and nuance. **Soprano Holly Flack** (read **James Bash’s profile here**) sang the role of Roderick’s twin sister Madeline, and was a dead ringer for a Hitchcock blonde with her hair twisted high around her head. She wandered the stage in a vivid red dress and makeup to match, singing notes without words in a kind of dreamy vocalise.



OrpheusPDX's 2022 production of "Fall of the House of Usher." Photo by Owen Carey. Like Glass's music as a whole, Flack's vocal line was often a repetitive hum, and it was beautiful if uncanny—and not easy to do, though Flack was a violinist, which helped her

remember notes without words. At one point, when she screamed, she reached a high A-flat above a high C (she can go to high B above the A-flat). Glass wrote the note as a lower A-flat, but Flack—who can reach extreme heights with her voice—sang the A-flat an octave higher after consulting with conductor **Michelle Rofrana**, who obviously approved. Flack’s exacting high vocal range inspired yet another moment of chills and goosebumps.

Madeline is assumed to be sick and as off the rails as her detached hypersensitive twin brother, and so is buried alive in the family crypt—though she comes back to life. Several clues imply that she and her brother have an incestuous relationship. Imagine what you want. This is a dark piece, and the list of madnesses is long.

Baritone Timothy McDevitt, also a musical-theater pro as well as opera singer, sang the role of William, the ever-optimistic “intruder” who tries to bring the Ushers back to life and to move the action forward. But he fails in his efforts. He is always there—the long-lost friend, the lover, the comforter, the enabler—and his good spirits and intentions are forever foiled by the Ushers’ downward spin. His clothes, including a tight T-shirt with daisies and minuscule bathing trunks (which he spends a chunk of onstage time in) were in sync with the production’s time and tone. Designer **Alison Heryer** nailed the costumes, including Roderick’s prissy two-piece Madras pool outfit.



OrpheusPDX's 2022 production of "Fall of the House of Usher." Photo by Owen Carey.

Great bones

Besides the well-tuned cast, the opera has great bones. **Edgar Allan Poe's** 19th-century spooky enigmatic tale, paired with Philip Glass's mesmerizing understated music, combined to produce a film-noirish piece set in 1969 Palm Springs (the retreat from Hollywood for the gay world) on the the same day actress **Judy Garland** overdosed on barbituates. The movie magazines hanging around the house made that coincidence clear. But it was the haunting music, premiered in 1988 with a libretto by Arthur Yorinks, that carried the opera from the beginning. Conductor Rofrano, with a 12-person orchestra (including synthesizer), never overplayed the score. She captured the ambiguity and sinister mystery of the story with the quiet pulsing staccato of the music and moments of pause. Poe writes about a crack in "the house," but in this production, the crack is Roderick's split life, and the music makes it all the more haunting.

Kevin Newbury—who directed another Glass chamber opera, *Galileo, Galilei*, 10 years ago for Portland Opera, when OrpheusPDX's artistic director **Chris Mattaliano** ran that company—skillfully pulled off his Palm Springs film noir concept. As Newbury said in his opera notes, think Alfred Hitchcock and *Sunset Boulevard*—and there you have the vibe of this one-act 85-minute piece about a strange disconnected household falling headfirst down the existential drain.



OrpheusPDX's 2022 production of "Fall of the House of Usher." Photo by Owen Carey. Newbury, though a constantly busy opera director, is also a filmmaker, and he decided to include a black and white movie of the cast acting as Hollywood film stars (Madeline still in her red dress). Interspersed with the opera, the silent film, which included a glimpse of the Hawthorne Bridge, was co-directed by [Greg Emetaz](#). The movie, projected onto the house without taking over the entire stage, worked mainly because of its link to Roderick's conflicted life and fantasies, and of course, he's a film star. But several aspects of this opera—the film, the long silences, the lack of ensemble singing, the dialogue at the beginning—pushed the piece firmly into the realm of theater.

Because OrpheusPDX produced only two chamber operas this first season (we want more), it's fair to compare the two. *L'Orfeo* was light, bright and breezy with a ton of brilliant ensemble and solo singing delivered in 90 minutes. *Usher* was gloomy, dark and moody with very little ensemble singing (several duets), and video/film that filled the gaps. *L'Orfeo* concluded with a fairytale happy ending; *Usher* didn't — the twins do in one another after Roderick fails to overdose, despite Judy Garland's precedent. Reflecting time periods centuries apart, and different cultural influences, both operas were utterly engaging. You could've heard a pin drop at either one.