

Here's a Strange One: A *House of Usher* Set in Sunny California

By James Bash, *Musical America*

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PORTLAND, OR—Philip Glass's *The Fall of the House of Usher*, based on the classic horror story by Edgar Allen Poe, received a fresh interpretation that successfully blurred the lines of repressed sexuality in a new production for Portland's nascent opera company, OrpheusPDX. Poe's macabre tale, set in operatic form by Glass in 1987 with a libretto by Arthur Yorinks, closed the company's inaugural season, drawing a near full house to Lincoln Performance Hall on August 25.

Director Kevin Newbury set the production in Palm Springs, the summer of 1969, symbolically aligning it to the Stonewall riots. Suffering from an undefined illness, Roderick Usher (Steven Brennfleck), is a closeted Hollywood star à la Rock Hudson who may be outed at any moment. He lounges by his swimming pool, watches old movies, pops many pills proffered by his doctor (Scot Crandal), and calls on William, his boyhood friend (Timothy McDevitt), to visit him. After William arrives, a fling ensues between the two, but Roderick gradually becomes sicker, and William resolves to get him out of the house. The old films suggest a romantic attraction between Roderick and his sister Madeline (Holly Flack). Meanwhile, Madeline wanders about the house, and in the final scene, when the house is put up for sale, she emerges from a tomb-like door in the floor of the living room to drape a scarf around Roderick's neck, and he dies.



Roderick's fixation on his twin sister and their cinematic past matches the psychological messiness of the original story. It was not clear that there was incest between the two. One could argue that Madeline seemed to erupt out of Roderick's imagination because she could walk right past the other characters who never saw or acknowledged her in any way.

The unrelenting repetitive patterns in Glass's score reinforce the sense of gloom that pervades the story. Several purely instrumental segments would have doomed the production were it not for the back-wall black-and-white projections of Greg Emetaz. They also helped evoke that bygone Hollywood era.

Looking pale and ashen, Brennfleck embodied the ill-fated Roderick while maintaining his resonant tenor. He was well-paired with the robust baritone of

McDevitt, who deftly created a caring friend and new romantic interest. Although Madeline is given no text other than "Ah," Flack made the most of it and soared to an A above high C on her final note. Outside of the films, she conveyed a neutral character who perhaps had to fulfill some ambiguous role.

Sicilian-American conductor Michelle Rofrano led the 12-member chamber orchestra and cued the singers with precision. She also maintained a proper balance, such that the voices were never overpowered. All of the action took place in a mid-century house with large, ceiling to floor windows and an outdoor patio that had a reclining lounge chair. Designed by Daniel Meeker, the set didn't always fit the libretto, such as when William notes the house's stones and its ancient character. Nor did the choice of Palm Springs, one of the sunniest locales in Southern California, quite match the story's dreary weather.

Owing perhaps to the downward trajectory of the piece, the limited emotional range of the characters, and the predictability of a Philip Glass score, audience response was warm if not enthusiastic. Still, the opera marked the end of a successful season for OrpheusPDX, and in the post-performance Q and A, General and Artistic Director Chris Mattaliano sounded as if it was full-steam-ahead for next year.

Pictured: Madeline (Holly Flack) stands over Roderick (Steven Brennfleck) as William (Timothy McDevitt) agonizes over Roderick's illness.

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