



CLASSICAL MUSIC & DANCE

Lyric Opera's 'The Juliet Letters' delivers creative and emotional intimacies

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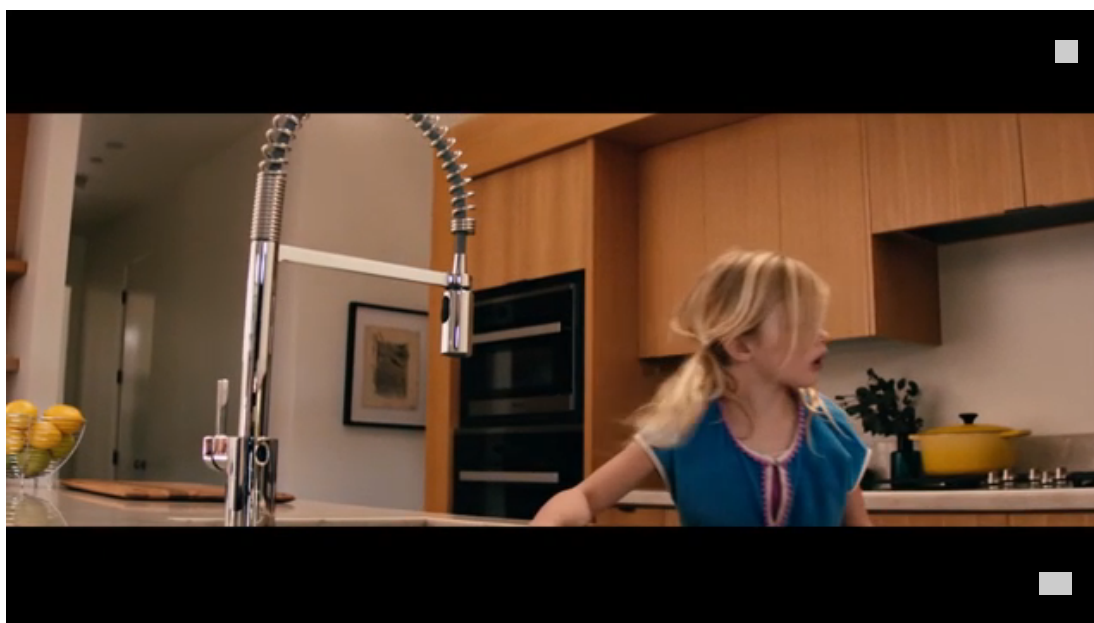
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The Juliet Letters, the latest production in the Lyric Opera of Kansas City's inaugural Explorations Series, was a fascinating, creative presentation examining the emotional release inspired by anonymous confidentiality, in a sold-out performance at the Michael and Ginger Frost Production Arts Building.

The project was based on the 1992 album of the same name by Elvis Costello and the Brodsky Quartet, a song cycle of fictional letters sent to William Shakespeare's tragic heroine Juliet.

The Lyric's resident artists (April Martin, soprano, Samantha Gossard, mezzo-soprano, Casey Candebat, tenor, John Viscardi, baritone) and the Fry Street Quartet (Robert Waters and Rebecca McFaul, violins, Bradley Ottesen, viola, Anne Francis Bayless, cello) inhabited these epistolary mini-dramas for voice and string quartet, Costello and company creating a series of succinct, lyrically-driven works, the characters lovelorn and confused, lost, alone, angry and, often, bitingly funny.

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This production expanded on the concept with smart, compact staging from director Fenlon Lamb, versatile set design from Jeff Ridenour, and intuitive lighting designed by Nate Wheatley with naked bulbs, effective spotlighting and silhouettes. In this hour-long through-composed work, the strings were centrally placed to serve as the primary voice and connecting feature.

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In obvious and effective symbolism, letters were pinned to chords strung across and about the performance area, casting fluttery shadows on the three oversize paper panels that served as backdrop. All was shaded in solemn gray tones, props and costumes, lending anonymity and versatility to the stories and characters.

With each letter/song, there was a different story and a different way of telling it. Sometimes, the primary singer was the writer, sometimes the reader, sometimes narrator to action, sometimes all the action at once. The lyrics — witty, caustic, disenchanting, pensive — were a primary feature, the melodies derived from the lay of the text and the instrumental writing in response to and support of these themes.

Each artist played a variety of characters, rotating as lead, displaying tragic moments and comic qualities: Gossard's gratified belief in "Romeo's Séance" and her sorrowful subtleties in "Dear Sweet Filthy World," Viscardi suave and smarmy in "This Offer is Unrepeatable," Candebat, bowtie unraveled, an unstoppable one-man kickline in "Damnation's Cellar," and Martin, heartbreaking as a rejected lover in "Taking My Life In Your Hands," a young soldier in "I Thought I'd Write to Juliet," and in the ensemble closer, "The Birds Will Still Be Singing."

It was a successful, intimate show, and the excellent musicians and crew delighted the audience in this noteworthy production.

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