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The following review was submitted by Mr. Igor Levental, a former critic for Opera News and Opera Canada magazines:

I came from Denver to Portland to see the premiere of *The Canticle of the Black Madonna*. I was intrigued by the relevancy of the story and the richness of the music which, combined with a remarkably strong cast of operatic actors, had the potential to break new ground on the operatic stage. And for me, it did. The psychological path of a tormented soldier returning from Afghanistan to Louisiana is innately dramatic and intrinsically current as our nation continues to debate its role in the war-torn Middle East. *The Canticle* is a XXI Century American *verismo* which combines the drama of re-introduction of Posttraumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD)-afflicted soldier into the civilian life which he left behind when he went to war. Add to that the emotional strife of his loving wife who is dealing with the shock of welcoming home a psychologically scarred man and you get a potent cocktail to move any opera goer. There is plenty of dramatic tension in this heartfelt story created by Tiziana DellaRovere whose libretto seamlessly blends with the powerful score composed by Ethan Gans-Morse. The resultant *Canticle* reverberates with pathos of a Greek tragedy which is further enhanced by the ever-present Greek Chorus that provides sonorous commentary to the proceedings on the stage. The chorus master Ethan Sperry masterfully achieved a full-bodied sound from his choristers.

The set, designed by Larry Larson, genuinely advances the story of *Canticle* during both acts. Baritone Michael Mayes, in the leading role of Adam, carries his PTSD trauma with both dignity and strength creating a moving portrait of a man on his journey from an emotional bottom toward healing and redemption. It is clear that Mayes is no novice to either modern American music literature or the contemporary dramatic setting having portrayed the central character of Joseph De Rocher in the production of Jake Heggie's *Dead Man Walking* at this year's Central City Festival. Soprano Lindsey Cafferky is also a natural for the part of Adam's wife Mara. She has the right tessitura for the vocal score of her multi-dimensional heroine and she manages to embody her character with the requisite amount of compassion, warmth and grace. Contralto Gwendolyn Brown as the Black Madonna is a unifying musical and dramatic force of the opera which culminates with the message of reconciliation and healing.

This production of the *Canticle* is felt particularly REAL by the presence of real war veterans who served as supernumeraries of this poignant production. Kudos to the team of Executive Producers headed by Mr. Gans-Morse and Ms. DellaRovere who brought the concept of a modern war opera to reality.

Igor Levental
Denver, Colorado
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