

Success for "GURU", the contemporary opera directed by Muriel Mayette-Holtz

For her first opera production, Muriel Mayette-Holtz, director of the Théâtre National de Nice, has taken on a contemporary opera composed by Laurent Petitgirard. No need for unnecessary suspense: this ambitious project, in partnership with Opéra Nice Côte d'Azur, is an undeniable success. The three performances of *Guru* at La Cuisine drew rapturous applause from the audience, who are sure to long remember the story of this sect and its dangerous guru.



GURU plunges viewers into the heart of a cult

With *GURU*, opera comes to the theater, unless it's the other way around. Either way, the two were made for each other. To stage this contemporary opera, which plunges us into the heart of a cult, we had to reorganize the layout of the La Cuisine stage. The Orchestre Philharmonique de Nice is positioned at the back, while the singers and chorus of the Opéra de Nice move to the front of the stage, close to the audience in the front row. No majestic backdrop, just a huge screen projecting images of the sea and, occasionally, of this narcissistic guru. On stage, a few grasses, some sand and a small watering hole are also there to remind us that the story we're about to witness takes place on an island. Indeed, this is where the members of a sect led by a dangerous and manipulative man, Guru, live. This contemporary opera, sung in French, is relatively short. Two intense hours in which the audience experiences the feelings of ancient tragedy: terror and pity.

High tension

When the charismatic Guru (masterfully played by baritone Armando Noguera) appears on stage, his words instantly echoed in chorus by his blinded followers, it's clear that the outcome of this story will be fatal. If there was the slightest doubt, it is immediately dispelled when we learn that **this opera was inspired by the tragedy suffered by members of a sect in the United States at the end of the 1970s**: over 900 people died in a mass suicide instigated by a guru. Right up to the opera's tragic denouement, **the tension never ceases to mount**, until it creates a certain unease in the audience, made all the stronger by the fact that they are so close to the stage, helplessly witnessing the drama unfolding before their eyes. Muriel Mayette-Holtz has chosen a theatrical stage set-up, which is particularly well-suited to the subject of this opera, which plunges into the heart of the mechanism of mental control and manipulation. Guru's followers blindly follow his orders: reclusive on a desert island, they live on salt water alone. The baby born of the union between Guru and sect member Iris (a moving Anaïs Constans) receives the same treatment. The scene in which a particularly lifelike baby appears in a cradle connected to a drip filled with seawater is chilling. The baby is dying and (almost) no one seems to mind. Marie (Sonia Petrovna), a newcomer to the sect, tries to get the others to react to the drama, but it's too late. The baby dies and follows Iris, inconsolable. She is responsible for some of the show's most moving scenes.

For almost two hours, Marie strives to destroy Guru: these are the words she utters the first time she speaks to him. She doesn't sing for the whole performance. As if isolated from the others, she speaks and, like a modern-day Cassandra, warns of the dangers and tries to bring the followers back to their senses. But to no avail. The tragedy must fulfill its fateful destiny, orchestrated by this Machiavellian guru whose madness grows and grows, so much so that at the end, when Marie's heart-rending cry resounds, the spectators want to do as she does, stunned by such horror.