

Guru by Laurent Petitgirard, directed by Muriel Mayette-Holtz, Opéra Nice Côte d'Azur, Théâtre national de Nice (salle La Cuisine)



Dominique Jaussein

ff article by **Emmanuelle Saulnier**

The creation of a contemporary opera is always an event to be welcomed, so rare is the phenomenon and so demanding the undertaking. *Guru* premiered in Poland (Castle Opéra de Szczecin) in 2018. Now, at the end of winter, it is being staged again in one of the halls of the Théâtre national de Nice, which is co-producing with Opéra Nice Côte d'Azur, in a close collaboration combining the staging of Muriel Mayette-Holtz (whose first operatic experience this is) and the involvement of the opera's orchestra and chorus. The score was composed by a regular at Nice's lyric institution, Laurent Petitgirard, who has conducted the philharmonic orchestra on a number of occasions, and who is clearly delighted to be back this time for his own work (after a first operatic experience in Nice 22 years ago, with *Joseph Merrick aka Elephant Man*). As the theater hall known as *La Cuisine* has no pit, the orchestra is placed on the stage, to which a "proscenium" has been added, allowing us to enjoy the musicians' performance, as in a concert version, but with a staging!

The idea of the composer, known for his film scores, is based on the true story, repeated several times since, of a mass suicide of almost 1,000 people in the USA in the late 1970s, led by a guru.

The enrolment of disciples by a charismatic manipulator who is caught up in the game of his own madness is at the heart of the story, as is the staging, which does not hesitate to depict a scene of sexual assault and rape. While there may be some similarities in contemporary musical writing with, for example, the work of Thierry Escaich, the two composers having in common their membership of the Académie des Beaux-Arts, Xavier Maurel's libretto does not always have the acuity one might hope for on such a serious subject (unlike Robert Badinter's in *Claude*), even if it does offer some interesting passages.

The chorus, imposing in its numbers and vocal power, joined by six soloists arriving from the hall, immerses the audience in the spirit of the confinement of a community of desperate people on their way to their final demise in a mingled impulse of devotion and fear, reflected in the expressions and gestures of fervor and submission. Among the soloists, if we had to name just one, it's Anaïs Constant in the role of Iris, the mother of the child chosen and sacrificed by and for the Guru. The soprano delivers a sensitive vocal performance, with impressive accuracy in the sometimes perilous succession and variation of the score, requiring great agility in a wide tessitura. She also finely modulates her passionate love for the *Guru* and her terror as a mother, with an emotion and acting quality that is at once dolorous and full of grace. The consistency of vocal quality is less evident for the *Guru*'s two acolytes, tenor Frédéric Diquero and bass Nika Guliashvili, who in their defense have to contend with the orchestra, whose accents and volume of sound rumble like a storm on this island populated by the sect, and against which it is difficult to fight. Similarly, baritone Armando Noguera has his work cut out for him in an acoustic not otherwise suited to operatic works, and his lead role demands demanding stamina and an almost constant presence on stage. Mezzo Marie-Ange Todorovitch, in the role of the *Guru*'s mother, and recitalist Sonia Petrovna, in the role of the rebel and sole survivor, complete the cast, in an effective and fluid direction of the actors, with set and costumes by Rudy Sabounghi and well-realized lighting by François Thouret. One might wonder about the relevance of the video (beach and sea sometimes darkened by the passage of crows, allegory of the bad omen hovering over the island, and close-ups of the soloists and conductor), which perhaps distract the spectator's attention too much or, on the contrary, lighten the spectacle of this suffering and the overwhelming fatality of the dying, on this cracked ground, like that of a volcanic earth that finally engulfs all semblance of humanity in these undead who have desperately believed in the vain quest for truth.



Dominique Jaussein

Guru by Laurent Petitgirard

Libretto: Xavier Maurel

Musical direction: Laurent Petitgirard Stage

direction: Muriel Mayette-Holtz Sets and

costumes: Rudy Sabounghi

Costume assistant: Quentin Gargano-Dumas

Lighting: François Thouret

Video production: Julien Soulier

Assistant musical directors: Frédéric Deloche, Paul Rouger Choir

director: Giulio Magnanini

Singing director : Mari Laurila-Lili

Assistant director: Ornella Bastoni Stage

manager: Manon Launey

With : Amando Noguera, Sonia Petrovna, Anaïs Constans, Frédéric Diquero, Nika Guliashvili, Marie-Ange Todorovitch and the Opéra de Nice Chorus, and the Orchestre Philharmonique de Nice

Running time: 2h15 (no intermission)

February 20 to 24, 2024