

THEATRE



Photo by Matt Polk

Kevin Gray plays the Engineer in Miss Saigon.

Miss Saigon

BY CHRISTOPHER HOILE July 14, 2010 12:07

EDITORIAL RATING: ★★★★★☆

Music by Claude-Michel Schönberg. Lyrics Richard Maltby, Jr., and Alain Boublil. Directed by Barry Ivan. Featuring Ma-Anne Dionisio, Kevin Gray. Presented by Dancap Productions with Pittsburgh Civic Light Opera. To Aug 1. Tue-Sat 7:30pm; Wed, Sat & Sun mats 2pm. \$28-\$175. Four Seasons Centre, 145 Queen St. West. 416-644-3665. www.dancaptickets.com

There's no question now about what musical to see in Toronto this month. It's *Miss Saigon* in its first professional revival here since it opened the Princess of Wales Theatre where it played from 1993 to 1995. The Dancap presentation of the Pittsburgh Civic Light Opera production even features two of the show's original Toronto stars - Ma-Anne Dionisio in the title role and Kevin Gray as the barker/pimp known as the Engineer. Listening to the lush, complex score of this 1989 pop opera, one wonders how it ever happened that so many jukebox musicals and musicals based on third-rate movies now infest our stages.

Miss Saigon, written by the same team who created *Les Misérables*, transfers the story of Puccini's *Madama Butterfly* to 1970s Vietnam. As in Puccini, an Asian girl marries an American serviceman, who leaves her and vows to return. When he does, he arrives with his new

American wife to discover the Asian girl has borne him a son. Dionisio gives a fiercely engaged performance as Kim, the Vietnamese Butterfly, singing with a beautiful fulness of voice she did not have before. It's worth seeing the show simply to experience her powerful performance. As Chris, her American lover, Aaron Ramey does not match her intensity but does have a surprisingly lovely tenor voice that he uses to fine effect in such songs as "Why God, Why?" Kevin Gray plays the Engineer as more comic than menacing and would have greater impact if the reverberant acoustic of the Four Seasons Centre did not blur his words. In fact, the entire cast is made up of strong singers from Josh Tower as Chris's best friend and Becca Ayers as Chris's wife to Devin Ilaw as the Vietnamese official who wants to marry Kim.

Director Barry Ivan directs with a clear focus on the human emotions of the story that even the famous arrival of the helicopter does not disrupt. Unusual for a musical nowadays, the show features a 19-member band which brings out richness and detail one seldom encounters in today's musical scores. This production marks the first time the Four Seasons Centre, built for unamplified music, has been used for an amplified musical. The hall has a livelier acoustic than other venues that is kinder to higher- rather than lower-lying voices and tends to muddy the choral passages. Despite this, *Miss Saigon* emerges as a great musical, still impressive twenty years later for its scope and imagination. If you didn't see it last time, be sure to see it now.