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Wozzeck, Lyric Opera of Chicago — ‘Absorbing, shattering’

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From left, Zachary Uzarraga, Tomasz Konieczny and Angela Denoke. Photo: Cory Weaver

A fascist-style monument to a fallen soldier stands at centre stage in David McVicar’s absorbing new production of Alban Berg’s expressionistic opera. Yet McVicar sets the action in the early 20th century, perhaps during the first world war, when Berg began work on the opera. Could the ramshackle army in *Wozzeck*, led by its paranoid Captain, really develop into the Nazi Wehrmacht, as the presence of the monument seems to suggest?

The idea, unobtrusively expressed, underscores the institutionalised brutality of the army’s treatment of its own soldiers, while never distracting McVicar from the central task of exploring the devastating consequences of that brutality on the lowly Wozzeck and those he loves. Already psychologically wasted when the opera begins, he endures trauma as the subject of medical experiments and is driven to kill his unfaithful common-law wife Marie, the mother of his son.

Vicki Mortimer's decor, sensitively lit by Paule Constable, is imaginatively sprinkled with archaic details that stress the forbidding nature of Wozzeck's surroundings, such as a four-wheeled velocipede, which the soldier uses to haul cargo, and a simple white curtain pulled across the stage for scene changes.

The conductor Andrew Davis stresses the atonal opera's link to late Romanticism not so much by emphasising the score's lush textures as by bringing out the lyricism of its fine points. This is particularly true in the interludes, so that the stunning final one emerges logically rather than as a standalone eruption of passion.

In a powerful portrayal, Tomasz Konieczny deploys his rich and expressive baritone to suggest not just Wozzeck's misery but also his unrealised potential. Angela Denoke is an outstanding Marie, whose voice sounds fresh and true — particularly in the tender scenes with her young son — despite the soprano's heavy diet of challenging modern music. The bass Brindley Sherratt, as the Doctor, is the standout among subsidiary roles.

In the shattering final scene, the son of Wozzeck and Marie, scarcely comprehending his orphaned state, puts aside his hobbyhorse and climbs aboard the velocipede in emulative tribute to his father but also as a sign of his own grim future.



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