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Where 'Don Carlos' Meets Pooh Bear

By George W. Loomis

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The Estonian capital of Tallinn has long been a favorite for those seeking a getaway from city life. The charm of its medieval buildings aligning narrow streets might alone make a trip worth while, so it come as a bonus to find nestled within them good restaurants at reasonable prices and plentiful opportunities for shopping. Here is a setting, in short, that might be considered ideal for any number of activities, not least among them attending musical events, as a trip last weekend to sample three offerings of the Estonian National Opera confirmed.

The 90-year-old company has a proud heritage. The theater building, which also houses a concert hall, is an early example of Finnish Modern design and sits impressively just outside the city center. Like any musical institution functioning within a former communist state, however, the ENO faces the twin nemeses of eroding governmental support and competition from the West for its best artists.

At any rate, the current regime of chief conductor Paul Magi and chief producer Neeme Kuningas seems to have a good grip on the situation. The house's repertoire looks as if it may have been chosen with the tourist in mind, but with ticket prices at roughly the same level as those in St Petersburg, income from the box office can't be much. In addition to the expected offerings of opera and ballet, the schedule includes Viennese operettas and musicals.

Operettas go back to the beginning of the company's history, when productions were imported from Vienna. And their continuing popularity in Tallinn is reflected in the ticket prices, which are at their highest on operetta nights.

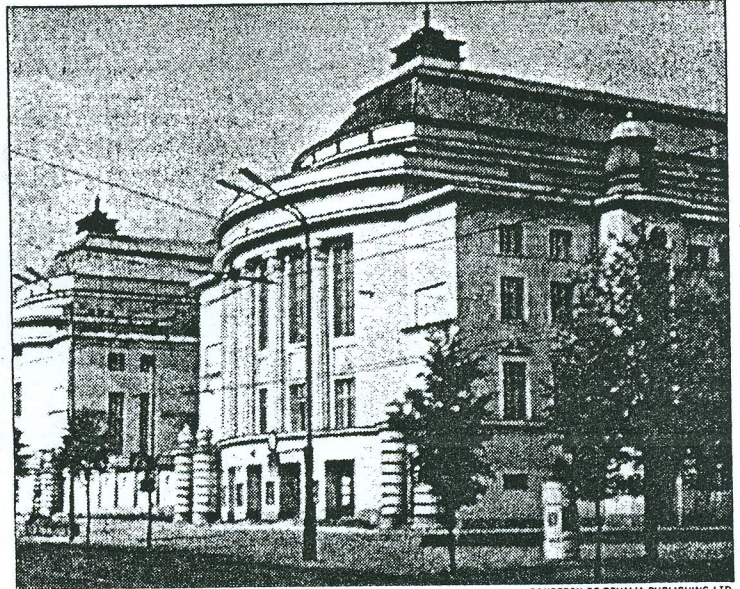
Monika Wiesler's 1994 production of Johann Strauss' "Wiener Blut" carries on the operetta tradition in exemplary fashion. Arranged in 1899 from an assortment of the 73-year-old composer's dances, "Wiener Blut" is surely one of the most successful of all operatic pastiches. The irresistible appeal of Strauss' melodies makes any quibbles about deficiencies in musical continuity seem academic. Those melodies had to serve double duty for the foreign visitor, since the piece was sung in Estonian and — unlike the case with operas — no English synopsis was provided.

Yet all one really needs to know is that the action is set in Vienna during the Congress of 1815 and revolves around the efforts of Count Zedlau, the Viennese ambassador of Reuss-Schleiz-Greiz, to manage the three women in his life: his wife, his current mistress and (he hopes) his future mistress — the girlfriend of his faithful valet, Josef. When the extent of the Count's philandering becomes known, it is charitably attributed simply to the power of Viennese blood.

Wiesler lays out the action crisply and directly, avoiding the easy laugh and other broad-brush shenanigans that can make operettas seem silly. Like its obvious model "Die Fledermaus," "Wiener Blut" devotes its central act to one grand party, played out in this case with stylish choreography and all the requisite opulence. Here and elsewhere conductor Erki Pehk was alert to the rhythmic subtleties of the waltz tradition.

None of the three women — Annika Tonuri, Pirjo Levandi and Margit Saulep — sang with quite the right Viennese sparkle, but all went about their tasks adeptly. Mati Korts' Count Zedlau was sung in attractive tones, though it could have used more seasoning, while Alar Haak infused the part of Josef with much character. Voldemar Kuslap was a strong presence as Prince Ypsheim-Gindelbach, the prime minister of Reuss-Schleiz-Greiz, with whom the Count's mistress is rather incongruously paired at the final curtain. One looks forward to Wiesler's new "Fledermaus," due in February.

"Hello Doll!" is in the reper-



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The theater in Tallinn which houses the Estonian National Opera Company.

lively "Winnie-the-Pooh" turned out to be strictly for kids — and, owing to the language, Estonian ones at that. This was a local effort, with a spicy, jazzy, but not particularly memorable score by Estonian composer Tony Raadik. In a switch, this reviewer had to depend on his 10-year-old son for help with the plot, but even that Pooh expert could not decipher everything.

At the other end of the spectrum entirely was Verdi's noble drama "Don Carlos." Kuningas' 1994 production sets the action on a steeply raked disc with few props. The director was aided in his effort to get to the emotional heart of the opera's characters by Kustav-Agu Puuman's elaborate, traditional costumes, which seemed a metaphor for the social and political conventions that thwart their personal aspirations. The stage setting was less successful when the disc shifted positions to reveal cloistered sides; with little room at the front of the stage, characters often stood atop the disc as the action took place, sometimes disconcertingly, on two levels.

The standout in the cast was baritone Aare Saal, whose ardent portrayal of Rodrigo reminded one of the young Sherrill Milnes. Aivars Krancmanis' King Philip rang out forcefully and had plenty of fire. Teo Maistes delivered the Inquisitor's lines smoothly and tellingly. Jana Ivanilova's Elizabeth had some good moments vocally and was dramatically sure. Riina Airene was an attractive Princess Eboli but was undone by her great aria "O don fatale!" Vello Jõrna's Don Carlos needed more finesse. Conductor Jüri Alperen and his forces displayed a solid grasp of Verdi's magnificent score.

Estonian National Opera Company in Tallinn. Box Office Tel. (372)-6-260-215. *Wiener Blut* is scheduled for Dec. 5 and Jan. 7; *Don Carlos* for Nov. 27, Dec. 1, and Jan. 31; *Winnie-the-Pooh* for Jan.

