

INGLANE ARVAB VARGAMÄEST

Truth and Justice of Vargamäe

Musical based on the first book of "Tõde ja õigus" ("Truth and justice") by Anton Hansen Tammsaare
Sung in Estonian with subtitles in English and Russian.

Music Tõnu Raadik
Libretto Endrik Kerge
Conductor Aivo Välja
Assistant Conductor Lauri Sirp
Stage Director Endrik Kerge
Designer Liina Pihlak
Lighting Designer Airi Eras

I saw the premiere of this musical, which might be described as an operetta, but with much spoken dialogue. I was pleased that there were English surtitles to allow an outline of the plot, but the Estonian speaking friend who accompanied me told me that I was missing a lot and there were sometimes chunks of dialogue when I looked to the surtitles in vain. Thus my comments must be taken on the basis that I was only partly following the text.

The book by Tammsaare is famous as an archetypal Estonian story about competing neighbours, long-term bickering and the harshness of rural life. Thus for a visitor, the production provides some insights into traditional Estonian attitudes such as hard work and the links with the land. Straddling the second half of the 19th Century, it comes as no surprise that the male characters are centre stage. The musical benefits from excellent lead performances from Priit Volmer, as Andres, the dour, but honest land-owner who works himself and everyone around him with a rigour that eventually leads to the death of his wife and Jassi Zahharov as his untrustworthy, but exuberant neighbour. The production values are high and the revolving set provides a dynamic frame for the drama.

The mix of humour and conflict kept my attention in the first half, although the score is well-crafted, but unremarkable. The story reaches a climax just before the interval with the death of the wife of Andres and much emotional power is generated.

However, I found the second half much harder work. There are a series of sub-plots dealing with the children of the two families, who one by one desert the difficult land for a brighter life in the Army or the City. This fragmented narrative lacks the power of the sharp focus on the main figures in the first half. Greater assistance from the surtitles would be a benefit for non-Estonian speakers, but I suspect that there are structural problems that are less easy to deal with.

Can I recommend "Truth and Justice of Vargamäe" to non-Estonians? Yes - if, within a theatrical framework, you want to find out more about Estonian attitudes, the rural underpinning of this Baltic state and the roots of the population shift to the towns. While the absence of sentimentality and the humorous interludes are also plusses, those expecting an entertainment will be disappointed. I'm sure that the production will have greater resonance for Estonians.

[18 March 2003, 04:09 AM: Message edited by: Stuart Sweeney]

from excellent lead performances from Priit Voimer, as Andres, the poor, but honest land-owner who works himself and everyone around him with a rigour that eventually leads to the death of his wife and Jassi Zahharov as his untrustworthy, but exuberant neighbour. The production values are high and the revolving set provides a dynamic frame for the drama.

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