

TALLINN

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GUIDE

## Tüür: Wallenberg

"What I do is not enough, but it would be a start." Holocaust hero Raoul Wallenberg and his nemesis Adolph Eichmann both sang those words in Erkki-Sven Tüür's *Wallenberg* at the Estonia Theater in Tallinn in May.

Good versus evil, myth making, and modern tragedy all reside in this powerful opera (Tüür's first), inspired by the Swedish diplomat who saved 100,000 Jews from the Nazis at the end of World War II in Budapest, only to be sent to the Gulag by the occupying Russians. It was commissioned and premiered by Dortmund Opera in 2001, with a tightly crafted libretto by German playwright Lutz Hübner. The Tallinn production was a new one by Russian director Dmitri Bertman.

When Bertman's production was first presented in 2007, it marked a probable first in operatic history: after the removal of a Soviet war monument from central Tallinn in April, the Russian government forbade Bertman to come to Estonia (he was allowed to attend the June 1 premiere). Undaunted, he asked Estonian director Neeme Kuningas and designer Ene-Liis Semper to follow through with his staging. Rehearsals were held over the Internet, using online pictures from the stage.

Bertman, enfant terrible of Moscow's Helikon Opera, gives *Wallenberg* a universal aspect as opposed to Dortmund, where Nazi symbolism dominated. His view is timeless, as if "from the 42nd Century", he said.

The diplomats were ornately dressed, with powdered wigs and heavy makeup. The Germans wore black leather and carried light sabers. The Jews had prayer shawls. The Gulag prisoners were in rags. Russians wore red. Wallenberg wore white, with a prayer shawl after his first rescue failed. Eichmann, sung by bass Priit Volmer in a sepulchral tessitura, swept on and off in a black leather cape, with silver epaulets and a white wig.

It is a stinging satire—two acts and 19 scenes, moving from Stockholm and Budapest to somewhere in the Gulag.

A Star of David took shape in the darkness as members of the Estonian Opera Chorus,

each holding a candle, gathered onstage in the Prologue to muse about Wallenberg. Several scenes used a long banquet table bathed in color—gold in Stockholm, black in Budapest for Eichmann's reception, red in Moscow where a pair of comical Soviet officers clutched mikes as they mimicked the doublespeak given to Wallenberg inquiries over the years.

There were three Wallenbergs: the diplomat, heartbreakingly portrayed by Estonian baritone Rauno Elp, Wallenberg-as-Elvis (tenor Mati Turi) who cruelly taunted his alter ego in captivity, and a yogi in loincloth who performed amazing contortions in the final scene as a Jewish mother repeated offstage a haunting description of her family in ashes.

The 19 singing roles included diplomats with funny walks, a quasi-rapping German officer whom Wallenberg intimidated Scarlet Pimpernel-style, a woman who tried to comfort Wallenberg (there are no love scenes in the opera), the Jewish mother movingly sung by Aile Asszonyi, and a trio of Gulag prisoners grateful to have shared confinement with the famous man.

'Wallenberg Circus', the grossly irreverent finale, opened with a merry little waltz by the chorus. Everyone was there to join in, including Mickey Mouse, Donald Duck, Russian nesting dolls, Americans, Russians, and characters from earlier in the opera—even the ever-spiteful Eichmann. A smiling Ronald Reagan sang of making Wallenberg an honorary American citizen (1981). A spastic American general bragged about Wallenberg (whose mission was partly sponsored by the US), and Jacob Wallenberg basked in his nephew's celebrity. Reagan look-alike, baritone Väino Putra, had four hands, two of them Eichmann's reaching from behind Reagan's back.

The Estonian National Opera Orchestra, led by Music Director Arvo Volmer, went Bayreuth one further by performing completely out of sight beneath a raked stage floor (Volmer's idea). TV monitors supplied sight lines for the singers, and Tüür's brass-percussion-rich music sounded perfect in the 700-seat neo-classical theater.

Tüür's pungent, post-modern score makes no concessions to neo-romanticism. Painful stabs of brass occurred often, and his use of tubular bells for alarms recalled his mentor Lepo Sumera's Symphony No. 2. Traditional harmony and melody happened at telling moments, such as Wallenberg's first entrance amid a warm halo of sound. The 'Death March' was appallingly catchy, with SS troopers "walking" their fingers and drumming their hands as Jews were stripped of their coats en route to Auschwitz. Swedish passports rained from the sky as Wallenberg mourned the Jews to a moment of aching Pärt minimalism.

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