

## Euridice Returns (Again)

Dancers minister to a pair of ill-fated lovers

by Deborah Jowitt

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Isadora Duncan found the legend of Orpheus and Euridice apt for dancing, and challenged music from Christophe Willibald von Gluck's opera *Orfeo ed Euridice* by dancing as the sole embodiment of Gluck's choruses of lamenting companions, Furies, and Blessed Spirits. Igor Stravinsky wrote an instrumental Orpheus ballet for George Balanchine in 1948. In 1996, Mark Morris staged Gluck's opera, with the singing chorus anchored to an onstage platform while a dancing chorus interacted with the principals. In 1999, Trisha Brown directed Claudio Monteverdi's *L'Orfeo*, miraculously embroiling all the singers and dancers in the flow of the story.

Now comes a different theatrical and musical creation: Ricky Ian Gordon's *Orpheus and Euridice*, directed and choreographed by Doug Varone and presented as part of Lincoln Center's Great Performances & American Songbook's "New Visions" series. It would be unfair to compare Gordon to the great composers listed above, but his score is lovely in its own delicate way, and it skillfully plays upon the skills of its principal performers. The hero of this two-act chamber opera has become a clarinetist (the virtuoso player Todd Palmer), while the splendid coloratura soprano Elizabeth Futra plays both Euridice and the story's narrator. The only other musician, pianist Melvin Chen, sits at his instrument on a wheeled platform, wearing a long coat (by Jane Greenwood) that unites him with the eight dancers (John Besant III, Daniel Charon, Natalie Desch, Adriane Fang, Stephanie Liapis, Michael Sean Marye, Catherine Miller, and Eddie Taketa).

As my colleague Michael Feingold pointed out in his eloquent review on the *Voice* website last week, Allen Moyer's set—a box of white scrim with a gray floor, white chairs, and white piano—suggests a hospital waiting room (or the waiting room to Hell proper of which Gordon's lyrics speak); so does Robert Wierzel's lighting. And the dancers wear what look like spilt-sided bathrobes, their sashes untied, over white outfits with shaggy pant legs. The allusion to AIDS hangs over this gentle, sweetly mournful piece in which even bliss seems fleeting and shadowed; Euridice wastes quietly away into death.

Varone's dancing chorus instigates mobility as well as emphasizing facets of Gordon's libretto. Not only do the dancers hoist the brave and remarkably compliant Palmer and Futra; they gently lead the two on and bring them together. They never dance pretty interludes, and Varone's movement palette is relatively simple—enhancing rather than distracting from the flow of the story. Their roles, however, are many. They become living furniture for Euridice to sit upon. They frame her. When Orpheus plays wild notes, they eagerly hitch their chairs closer or frolic around him like the beasts he charms. Sometimes they're romping children that Euridice has to calm with a glance, and like kids, they swoop piano and pianist around the stage and steal his music for quick perusal. Euridice lifts their arms high to create a momentary garden bower. As Furies, they drag and upend Orpheus, but not too violently. Most often I see them as wise nurses, caretakers who soothe and veil grief and loss, who preside over death and sponsor resurrection. And when Euridice comes to life a second time (as narrator, she has to), they spin the pair, now on the piano platform, as if whirling the dismembered parts of Orpheus into musical eternity.

*Orpheus and Euridice*

By Ricky Ian Gordon

Frederick P. Rose Hall

October 5 through 8

See also:

• [Gordon and Varone Renovate Death's Waiting Room](#)

by Michael Feingold