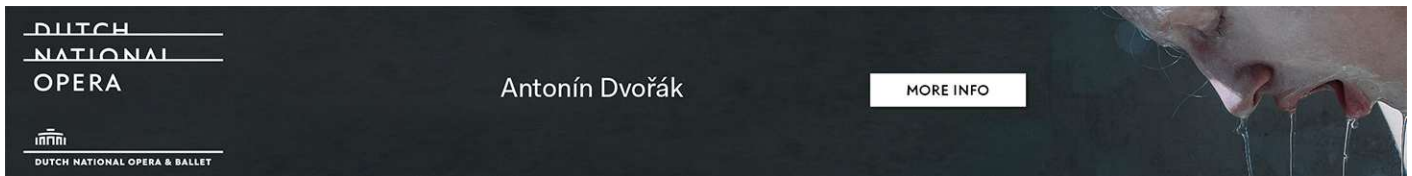


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Descent into hell: Opera Zuid's madcap *Orpheus in the Underworld*

By [Eleanor Knight](#), 15 June 2023

It's hot as hell this week in the Netherlands, so thank the gods of air conditioning as [Opera Zuid](#) serve up Offenbach's madcap casserole of diabolical delights, *Orphée aux enfers*. There's nothing remotely sensible anyone can write about this romp *française* through classical antiquity, suffice to say that the show that originally bridged the cultural gulf between the Palais Garnier and the Folies Bergères cannot fail to delight any contemporary audience with a pulse. Every now and again someone claims to be making the whole ridiculous spectacle 'relevant' – this time it's Benjamin Prins sneaking some lines about "fake news made up by journalists" into his witty updating of the Crémieux/Halévy libretto – but honestly: go analyse a sandwich.





Francis van Broekhuizen (Junon) and Roger Smeets (Jupiter)

© Joost Milde

Marrit van der Burgt and Pilo Pikes – costumes and wigs respectively – have had a ball. One of the chorus has an enormous blue head, while Public Opinion (in a not in the least understated performance by Thomas Morris) is pitch perfect in sparkles as Rotary-wife-at-a-function. There are S&M lady satyrs (tutus in place of the usual appendage) in sheep's clothing. The gods hang around on designers Marloes en Wikke's peachy powder puff Olympus until they hear that Pluto serves gin and tonic and set off *en masse* to the neon-lit nightclub at the end of the universe, Hell Yeah.

Opera Zuid's *Orphée aux enfers*

© Joost Milde

There's a lot going on and it's fairly silly, but there's still room for it to get a lot sillier. Offenbach wrote a great deal more music for this bouffe-cum-burlesque than just the vocal numbers and, although Willy Laury has created a sheep ballet and later on something similar for the satyrettes, there's a sense that Prins feels he has to hold up the story while he waits for the words to come

round again. All this makes for a sense of disjointedness to many of the jokes and some curious moments of playing the libretto straight. When Cupid – a winsome Sophie Collin – comes in late after a night out and sings “Mystery shrouds my return” it’s a comic opportunity missed. When Venus (Marina Ruiz, not to be underused) and Apollo (Tom Jansen) repeat the lines, that’s two more. Wit needs even spreading if we’re to enjoy it to the full.

Mark Omvlee (Pluton)

© Joost Milde

But for any dry areas there are pockets of jam elsewhere. Anna Emelianova’s commanding Diana gives Acteon CPR and Francis van Broekhuizen almost steals the show as the Juno who’s seen it all (which she has, of course). Her wandering husband (and the ebullient Roger Smeets does oddly resemble Stanley Johnson in that hat) has disguised himself as anything and everything from a cat to a cloud the better to assuage his relentless sexual appetite. Even the family are laughing at him for overcomplicating things. One day Juno will sit him down and tell him all he has to do is to take the bins out.

Mathys Lagier (Orphée) and Amel Brahim-Djelloul (Eurydice)

© Joost Milde

And what about the ill-fated lovers that set this cavalcade of craziness in train? [Amel Brahim-Djelloul's](#) perky Eurydice has buckets of pastoral charm and all the athletic agility to power her through the vocal pyrotechnics of the third act. Mathys Lagier as the titular musician nobody should go out with is exuberant in his romantic self-absorption.

Opera Zuid's *Orphée aux enfers*

© Joost Milde

A touring show, for the fraction of the budget of say, Emma Rice's at ENO in 2019, Opera Zuid's may not be the definitive *Orpheus* of recent years: that accolade must surely go to Spymonkey at the Vienna Volksoper – a show so bananas Offenbach would have died all over again just to watch it from the wings. But for anyone whose idea of a good time when it's 30 degrees outside is to descend into hell and do the cancan, this one may prove pure ambrosia.

★★★★☆ ?

“Amel Brahim-Djelloul's perky Eurydice has buckets of pastoral charm”  [SEE FULL LISTING](#)

Reviewed at Stadsschouwburg, Utrecht on 13 June 2023

PROGRAMME

Offenbach, *Orphée aux enfers* (Orpheus in the Underworld)

PERFORMERS

Opera Zuid

Enrico Delamboye, *Conductor*

Benjamin Prins, *Director*

Marloes en Wikke, *Set Designer*

Marrit van der Burgt, *Costume Designer*

Julian Maiwald, *Lighting Designer*

Philharmonie Zuidnederland

Het Zuidelijk Theaterkoor

Marloes van der Hoek, *Set Designer*

Amel Brahim-Djelloul, *Eurydice*

Mark Omvlee, *Pluton*

Roger Smeets, *Jupiter*

Francis van Broekhuizen, *Junon*

Mathys Lagier, *Orphée*

Thomas Morris, *Bacchus, L'Opinion Publique*

Jeroen de Vaal, *Mercure*

Anna Emelianova, *Diane*

Olivier Hernandez, *John Styx*

Marina Ruiz, *Venus*

Sophie Collin, *Cupidon*

Willy Laury, *Choreography*



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A striking, if perplexing, *Midsummer Night's Dream* from Opera Zuid

Clare Varney, 26th May

Ola Mafaalani's staging is a feast for the eyes with creative and edgy lighting, a clever and expressive use of colour and a stunning visual display, but not everything comes off successfully.

★★☆☆☆

In Amsterdam, a *Matrimonio segreto* for the future

Nicolas Nguyen, 19th March

Young singers, musicians and designers in this *Matrimonio segreto* co-produced by the three main opera companies in the Netherlands show that, on the stage and in the pit at least, the future of opera is bright.

★★★★☆

An enthusiastic and vibrant *La traviata*

David Pinedo, 7th July

On a warm summer night, Opera Zuid closes its season with an impassioned, but keen production of *La traviata* in the Concertgebouw.

★★★★☆

Voller Jugend für die Jugend: *L'elisir d'amore* an der Opera Zuid

Rainer Zerbst, 25th May

Ohne Chor, gekürzt und verjüngt – ein temporeicher und spritziger *Liebestrank* an der Opera Zuid.

★★★★☆

Elijah Moshinsky's *Rigoletto* revived splendidly at Opera Australia

Jeremy Eccles, 14th June

Could this be the last triumphant outing for the late, great Elijah Moshinsky's moving production of *Rigoletto*?

★★★★★

Rusalka makes a splash in a long overdue Teatro alla Scala debut

Laura Servidei, 15th June

Conductor Tomáš Hanus leads a great cast in a stunningly beautiful production of Dvořák's masterpiece directed by Emma Dante.

★★★★★

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Eleanor Knight

Eleanor is a writer and librettist. Her work has appeared in all kinds of places from the Royal Opera House to the foot tunnels beneath the Elephant and Castle roundabout, and she has written arts reviews and features for British papers and magazines. Having begun her working life in theatre, she switched to publishing and later taught creative

writing at the University of Brighton and Birkbeck. Currently based in the Netherlands, she teaches at the University of Utrecht. Eleanor plays violin and sings, though not usually at the same time, and has recently taken up speed-skating.

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