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# **Tempting and Dangerous. They Sing, Too.**

'Here Be Sirens' Blends Opera and Play

By STEVE SMITH JAN. 22, 2014

“Do you know what it means to be the insensate apparatus of a homicidal mythological order?” The composer and soprano Kate Soper, portraying Polyxo, one of three mellifluous murderesses of ancient legend, poses that question not long into “Here Be Sirens,” her substantial new musical-theater piece. The Morningside Opera is presenting the work’s premiere engagement at Dixon Place on the Lower East Side.

More accurately, Ms. Soper fairly shouts the question, playing a character trapped by a fate not of her choosing. Polyxo is directly addressing her sisters: Peitho, a perky ingénue played by Brett Umlauf, and Phaino, a quirky stoic portrayed by Gelsey Bell. The three are onstage continually, individually and collectively accompanying themselves at a rag-draped, lidless piano onstage in full view. But Ms. Soper is also addressing the audience directly, something she does throughout her brainy, baffling, consistently astounding 100-minute piece.

It’s not difficult to imagine Ms. Soper feeling a bit like a vessel buffeted by external forces. In a video filmed at the MacDowell Colony in Peterborough, N.H., last summer, she explains that “Here Be Sirens” started life as an operatic commission, transformed into a play as she wrote the libretto, and finally found its form as neither and both.

Yes, there is a story to follow in “Here Be Sirens”: a strand that subtly emerges from sounds and scenes that recur as if entrapped by a swirling tidal pool. As Ms. Soper expounds professorially on varying myths,

interpretations and tangents — a feverish mash-up of Homer and Freud, Jung and Sappho, Erasmus and Edna St. Vincent Millay — Peitho is transformed, gradually achieving a self-awareness that Polyxo and Phaino already possess.

Ms. Soper's music reflects a similarly virtuosic cacophony of styles. Opening with a haunting hymn delivered in darkness from behind and then around the audience, Ms. Soper references stark chant, Baroque extravagance, modernist dissonance and pop-tune directness in collision and collusion. The singers' voices, similar yet distinct, fuse repeatedly in hair-raising instants of both concord and discord. The piano, beyond its standard function, is a drum, a rattle, a gong and an echo chamber.

Lest that threaten to sound too brainy, know that "Here Be Sirens" is consistently funny — usually droll, occasionally uproarious. Ms. Soper ably plays the assertive foil to Ms. Umlauf's ditsy Peitho and Ms. Bell's aloof Phaino. Resourcefully directed by Rick Burkhardt, the performers express distinct personalities not just in narrative and song, but also through composure, posture and gesture.

Andreea Mincic's spare set provides exactly enough for the trio to work with: a chalkboard for Ms. Soper's manic figurations and glyphs; a short platform on which Ms. Umlauf can preen; a box of props for spontaneous pageants. Annie Holt's costumes — white fright wigs; fishnet leotards strewn with seashells and kelp; bony, clawed boots — conjure a grotesque allure.

Austin Smith's lighting is intrinsic to the drama. And Brad Peterson's video projections present an oceanic horizon increasingly cluttered with victims of the sirens' irresistible allure — a quality shared by Ms. Soper's remarkable show.

"Here Be Sirens" will be presented from next Thursday through Feb. 2 at Dixon Place, 161A Chrystie Street, between Rivington and Delancey Streets, Lower East Side; 866-811-4111, [dixonplace.org](http://dixonplace.org).

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