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Sky on Swings

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Marietta Simpson and Frederica von Stade in *Sky on Swings*
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OPERA PHILADELPHIA has become one of North America's premiere generators of valid new operas, in a range of genres. The collaboration between American composer Lembit Beecher and Canadian playwright Hannah Moscovitch has yielded three striking chamber works, on surpassingly serious subjects. Last year's OP festival featured the team's 2014 *I Have No Stories to Tell You*, depicting post-traumatic stress from both war and rape. At Drexel University a few weeks before, *Sophia's Forest* presented survivors' guilt. Each also explored collateral damage on family members.

This year's festival offered the world premiere of the poignant *Sky on Swings*, in which the casual violence and threat to subjective identity are not external but the depredations of Alzheimer's disease. Just under eighty minutes—and at that perhaps a few minutes too long—the new work presents the sad but slightly redemptive encounter of Martha and Danny, two women facing Alzheimer's. Martha, already institutionalized and increasingly losing her gift of language, welcomes Danny (an accomplished researcher we follow in the wrenching stages of admission to the home), eventually deciding she's a “summer friend, on whom she had a crush when she was a teenager.” Danny, while glad for the company, initially resists this misidentification but eventually yields to it as a needed source of affection and support. Expertly staged by Joanna Settle in spare but telling designs by Andrew Lieberman (set) and Pat Collins (lighting) in the intimate Perelman Theater, *Sky on Swings* made an appreciable impact on its audience at the matinee on September 22, two days after the world premiere.

Composer, librettist and director had the incalculable advantage of shaping their work around two justly revered mezzo-sopranos, Marietta Simpson (Martha) and Frederica von Stade (Danny). Their instruments inevitably show signs of time's passage, but both voices retain their personal aura, with Simpson remarkable for soft mellowness (Martha hums a lot) and lower-register resonance, and von Stade evidencing her trademark dead-on pitch and sterling clarity of word and musical phrase. Both drew on decades of experience in bravely portraying their roles with unsparing expressiveness and feeling. Moscovitch leavens the tragedy with a few humorous moments, but “Movie of the Week” sentimentality is largely refused.

Caregivers—Martha's daughter Winnie and Danny's son Ira—also appear, but largely through the lens of their parents' perceptions. They fade in importance as the work continues, and the suggestion of a relationship developing between them is barely hinted at by Moscovitch, with Settle arranging a single look between them as their mothers bond. The one soliloquy scene for Winnie, though moving as text and handled with virtuosity by high-flying Canadian soprano Sharleen Joynt, left a feeling of imbalance. Joynt, her character's weariness well conveyed in body language, showed a fluty, penetrating instrument at ease with cleanly executing difficult intervals. Ira was drawn with warmth and ringing sound by tenor Daniel Taylor.

Beecher's music, for a dozen players including an all-important pianist (Emily Senturia), deftly underlines and colors the text, with motives cycling repeatedly through varied instrumental treatment. The often aptly angular vocal writing was sagely cushioned by a quartet of four Elders (fine local singers Veronica Chapman-Smith, Maren Montalbano, George Somerville and Frank Mitchell) supplying both verbal and deconstructed syllabic feedback to the ongoing story. Conductor Geoffrey McDonald balanced and commanded his forces admirably in Perelman's fine acoustics. —*David Shengold*

