



Review: ‘Mata Hari,’ a Different Kind of Queen of the Night



Tina Mitchell, left, and Tomás Cruz in the opera “Mata Hari,” which is part of the Prototype festival.
MICHELLE V. AGINS / THE NEW YORK TIMES

By CORINNA da FONSECA-WOLLHEIM
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One hundred years ago this October, the Dutch dancer, courtesan and German-paid secret agent known by her stage name, Mata Hari, was executed by a French firing squad. Many fictional adaptations have capitalized on both the prurient and the tragic aspects of her life, most recently Paulo Coelho’s 2016 novel, “The Spy,” which offers a hagiographic portrait of a heroine whose “only crime was to be an independent woman.”

On Thursday at [Here](#), the [Prototype festival](#) presented the premiere of “Mata Hari,” an opera by the composer Matt Marks, with a libretto by Paul Peers, who also directed the show. Their tone is bracingly unsentimental, as is clear from the first swear words uttered by the chain-smoking nun who patrols the women’s prison where Mata Hari awaits her verdict.

Gone, too, are the exotic costumes, jewel-encrusted headpieces and striptease routines quoting Indonesian dance gestures that made Mata Hari famous. Instead, Mr. Peers’s smart libretto adopts a process that peels away his title character’s contradictions, unreliable memories, half-lies and compromising admissions in a way that subtly notches up the pathos.

To a certain degree, the score succeeds in reflecting those tensions. Mr. Marks’s most striking innovation is a bold mix of vocal styles. Mata Hari is a speaking role, here inhabited by Tina Mitchell, who plays it with coiled tension and brittle haughtiness. The part of her Russian paramour, Vadime, is given over to [Tomás Cruz](#), a pop and jazz singer. The male chorus, made up of other former lovers and current accusers, as well as the role of Sister Léonide (Mary Mackenzie), uses classically trained singers.

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All voices were amplified, so there was no power imbalance. Even so, each vocal technique implies a certain distance, from the mere arm’s reach of a quietly spoken word to the torpedo aim of an operatic soprano. Listening to both in the course of a dialogue requires a constant adjustment on the part of the listener. I found myself wishing for an auditory version of bifocal lenses.

Conducted by David Bloom, the quartet nimbly negotiated the score’s fluid transitions from gritty waltzes to punk-rock explosions, from rococo ornaments to dissonant chords. The most beautiful scenes used the excellent male singers as a chorus, creating a dark, captivating sound tapestry against which Ms. Mitchell’s spoken lines stood out fragile and naked.

Less successful was a scene in which Mata Hari recalls her son’s death. Its blend of spoken voice, soprano and Mr. Cruz’s vocals came across as maudlin and gauche.

But the different sonic worlds came together poignantly in a touching duet for the two women. As both intoned the phrase “I am sorry” at the same time, Ms. Mackenzie’s floated soprano appeared like a gentle radiance, haloing the spoken words.

Mata Hari

In repertory through Jan. 14 at Here, Manhattan; 212-647-0202, [here.org](#).