

# Operissimo

## Live from New York, it's a night at the opera in Dubai!

Last week, the New York Metropolitan Opera's Saturday matinee performance of Richard Strauss's *Salome* began at one in the afternoon in New York – and nine at night in Dubai's Madinat Jumeirah Theatre.

Dubai has joined the ranks of Sydney, Halifax and Tokyo: cities that broadcast select Met performances in real time and high definition. Last year, more than 920,000 people from 17 countries attended these broadcasts. Here, the screenings are put on by the Dubai Event Management Corporation (DEMC), the company launched by Sheikh Ahmed bin Mohammad Al Maktoum to organise live cultural events in the emirate.

Seeing opera on the big screen, in high definition and with frequent close-ups (plus peeks backstage) highlights the fact that it is one of the few remaining performance arts that totally ignores harsh contemporary standards of beauty. Qualified opera singers can reasonably expect to exce – unlike television or the top 40 pop market – even if they might not belong on the front of a glossy fashion magazine. Since opera singers portray their stories through song, a singer's appearances fall a far second to his or her vocal character, if they are even considered at all. The women tend to be heavy, the men more so.

At the actual Met, unless you're in the amphitheatre's front-most section you are probably far enough away that the bodies onstage do indeed become peripheral to the soaring voices carrying the story. But it's different up-close.

The Met's current staging of *Salome* features Karita Matilla as the titular beautiful princess who is lusted after by her stepfather, Herod, played by Kim Begley. Both de-

liver dazzlingly powerful vocal performances, but Matilla in particular does not look the part. "She looks older than him," my viewing companion can't help but point out.

When Salome gives in and agrees to perform the "Dance of the Seven Veils" for Herod, she does so quite seductively, and ends up straddling him. "Haram aleyou" (poor guy), the man on my left exclaims. Matilla is hardly lithe.

*Salome* is a thematically complex one-act opera based on a play by Oscar Wilde. Love, lust, jealousy, vengeance: it's a complicated story, more so when sung and even more so when sung in German. But, like any film in a European language, it came to Dubai complete with English subtitles.

"The subtitles help a lot," said Richard Attias, the CEO of DEMC. "Especially if you don't speak Italian or German."

Though the Moroccan-born Attias is perhaps best known for being the husband of Cécilia Ciganer-Albéniz, the former wife of the French President Nicolas Sarkozy, he is also a seasoned events organiser. He has orchestrated the World Economic Forum in Davos, the Islamic Conference in Dakar and the Petra Conference of Nobel Laureates in Amman. He moved to Dubai (which he describes as having "the energy of New York, the safety of Geneva and



Karita Matilla, Juha Uusitalo and Keith Miller in *Salome*. Marty Sohl / Metropolitan Opera

more and more culture and lifestyle like Paris") to run the DEMC, which launched in March.

The DEMC has already signed on for the entire rest of the Met's 2008-2009 broadcast season, which will last until May 2009. According to Attias, the goal of these live transmissions is to educate the population of Dubai about opera so that people will be excited to attend Dubai's own opera house when it opens. It has been announced that the space-ship-looking structure, designed by Zaha Hadid, will sit on an artificial island in the Dubai Creek and have room for 2,500 opera fans, an arts gallery, a performing arts school and a six-star theme hotel. No one

is sure when it will open. Attias estimates it will take a "few years".

Erminha de Marco, an Italian mezzo-soprano in the audience who gives private opera lessons in Dubai, told me that opera is already catching on here. "There's a lot of interest and much more students than you think."

Attias claims that opera is becoming more popular and less elitist. Perhaps screenings like these help by lowering the price tag. Tickets to the Dubai screening of *Salome* were 100 dirhams. On that budget, opera-goers in New York would be confined either to the "Family Circle", the seating area farthest from the stage, or the Met's "balcony boxes",

regarding which the Met's website cautions: there's only a "partial view".

The Madinat theatre was filled almost to capacity, and there was a buzzing energy in the air as the audience – mostly middle aged, married and well dressed expatriates – left the theatre. "It's fantastic to have New York in Dubai," said Christian Perdier, an elegantly dressed man who attended the screening with his wife Jocelyne and their equally crisp friends Ken and Patria Palmer.

Ken eagerly concurred. "It's a hell of a lot easier than flying to New York."

★ Maya Khourchid