

FACING DEATH WITH A SMILE

GYÖRGY LIGETI'S only opera, *Le Grand Macabre*, is an enthralling, scatological, ravishing rhapsody on the theme of mortality. Set in "Breughelland in some century or other", it evokes the phantasmagoric world familiar from the canvases of Breughel or Bosch. But in the mix are elements of the Theatre of the Absurd, Sixties "happenings", Cage, Kagel and other modernist tendencies.

The *Grand Macabre*, also named *Nekrotzar*, proclaims the advent of Death. Everybody panics and there is an apocalypse of sorts that dissipates when *Nekrotzar* is found to be a fraud.

The libretto, by Michael Meschke and Ligeti himself, descends all too frequently to the schoolboy level of *Viz*: Death may or may not reign but toilet humour certainly does. This can be seen as a metaphor, however, for the scabrous, grotesque aspects of human life. And there are frequent moments of ethereal beauty and stunning textural complexity such as only Ligeti could conjure.

The centrepiece of the spectacular staging by La Fura dels Baus is a gigantic hermaphroditic humanoid figure, from all of whose orifices characters emerge. Endlessly inventive, this production – a virtuoso piece of stagecraft – faithfully replicates the gestures of both music and text. The video design (Franc Aleu)

OPERA

LE GRAND MACABRE

Coliseum, WC2

★★★★☆

BARRY MILLINGTON

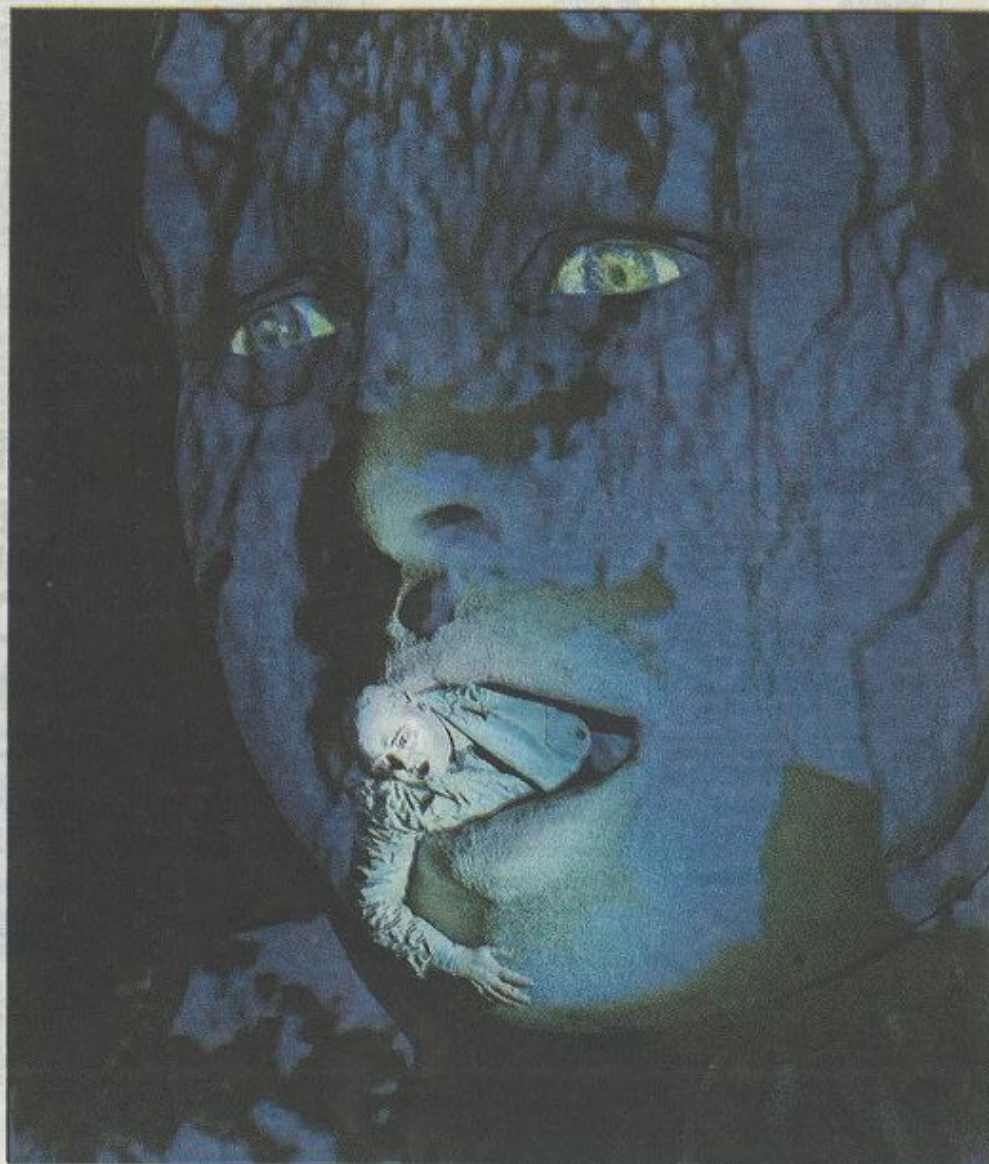
is of astonishing quality: the sequence of *Piet the Pot* and *Astradamors* floating to Paradise (or so they believe) is one of many memorable moments of visual and musical magic.

Wolfgang Ablinger-Sperrhacke and Frode Olsen take those roles admirably, as do Pavlo Hunka as *Nekrotzar*, Susan Bickley as *Mescalina*, Andrew Watts as *Prince Go-Go*, and Susanna Andersson doubling implausibly as *Venus* and the *Police Chief*. The fiendishly difficult score is delivered with breathtaking aplomb by the ENO orchestra under Baldur Brönnimann.

Whatever one's reservations about the work – and it's possible to feel that too much of it doesn't quite live up to its reputation – there's no disputing that ENO and La Fura dels Baus have done it proud.

The company could have opened its new season with, say, *Turandot*. Its boldness has been rewarded with a real event.

■ Until 9 October (0871 911 0200, www.eno.org).



Prophet of doom: *Nekrotzar* (Pavlo Hunka) emerges from the giant humanoid figure that dominates the stage

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