

BW Opera: *Taking Up Serpents* (Feb. 2 & 4)

by Daniel Hathaway



Baldwin Wallace Opera Theater became only the fourth company — and the first collegiate one — to stage Kamala Sankaram and Jerre Dye’s provocative *Taking Up Serpents* when the show opened at the Kleist Center for Theater and Drama in Berea on February 2.

Masterfully directed by Scott Skiba with a talented student cast and a 13-piece professional

chamber ensemble tightly conducted by Dean Buck, the one-act, 80-minute piece commissioned by Washington National Opera centers around 25-year-old Kayla, the daughter of a Holiness preacher in the Deep South.

A “lost soul and a wanderer,” Kayla’s on a quest to establish her own relationship with God outside the smothering confines of a patriarchal church that handles snakes,



speaks in tongues, and indulges in other questionable practices invented by Christian charismatics.

Dye’s libretto is based on his own experience of growing up in a household with a mother who might have aspired to be a Pentecostal preacher, but was prevented by her gender.

We first meet Kayla (sung on Friday evening and Saturday afternoon by Ava Grimes, and on Saturday evening and Sunday afternoon by Kaitlyn Tiemens) during her dinner break in the parking lot of the Sav-Mart chain drugstore in Gulf Shores, Alabama, where she has taken a job after fleeing from home and family.

She gets a call from her mother, Nelda (Abby Horn / Leah Kania), with the news that Daddy (Adam Zeidler / Adam Whanger) has been bitten by a snake during his sermon and lies dying in a hospital.



As she boards a Greyhound bus for home, two flashbacks inspired by New Year’s Eve fireworks take her back to painful events of her childhood — her mother speaking in tongues, and catching snakes with Daddy at Burkett’s Creek.

There, Young Kayla (Ella Skiba) is chastised by her father for her fear of snakes: “Weak as water, weak as Eve” — a direct reference to the matriarch who had her own complicated history with a serpent.



In the last of eight short scenes, “A surreal Juxtaposition of the Hospital Room, Burkett’s Creek, the Church of the Lord Jesus Christ, and Kayla’s Mind,” the story takes a sudden left turn when Nelda ends Daddy’s life with a pillow.



At the end of the opera, Kayla confronts her fear and leaves her past behind, triumphantly brandishing a snake in front of the congregation.

I saw the first and last performances of *Taking Up Serpents*, and the four double-cast leads were equally if differently impressive in their roles. Sankaram, who has many musical styles at her command, writes some stratospheric lines for the Kaylas and some blisteringly dramatic utterances for the Daddys that the student singers inhabited with passion and authenticity. On both occasions, the confrontation between Nelda and Kayla in the hospital scene was almost unbearably intense.

The supporting cast — who played Reba (Iyana Johnson), Donnie (Ryan Sweeney), Customer (Danielle Kagy), Queer Kid (Kaya Sparks), Young Mother (Aki Lasher), Bus Driver (Jordan Soderstrom), and the Congregants (Fiona Coughlin, Liz Fulmmer, and Lia Aceto) — turned in strong performances. A standout was fourth-grader Ella Skiba (daughter of the stage director), who portrayed Young Kayla with confidence.

Some striking musical touches included a parody of a Southern Shape-Note tune sung by the Greyhound bus passengers, and fervent Gospel-sounding praise music for the Congregants — first heard in a clever production number involving shopping carts at

the Sav-Mart. The chamber ensemble, which vividly realized the score, included fresh sounds like electric guitar and whirly tubes.

Mostly sung on a bare stage, *Serpents* benefitted from vivid projections designed by Brittany Merenda that allowed quick scene changes from a parking lot (with fireworks) to a field (more fireworks), a Greyhound station, Burkett's Creek (with fog machine), and a hospital room, including superimposed flashbacks to Daddy's church.

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