



Visceral Medium at Chelsea Opera By: [Steven Jude Tietjen](#) | Published on Nov 13, 2011

New York, NY - New York City is blessed with a menagerie of opera companies from the spectacles of the Metropolitan Opera at Lincoln Center to the bare, shoe-string productions in a church basement in the Bronx. Chelsea Opera, founded in 2004 by the energetically quirky Leonarda Priore and Lynne Hayden-Findlay, is a diamond among these small companies who work with dedication to nurture young singers, explore repertoire that is ignored by corporate opera, and present honest, earthy productions.

To inaugurate its eighth season, Chelsea Opera is commemorating the 100th birthday of recently departed composer Gian Carlo Menotti with a production of his spooky thriller *The Medium*. Commissioned by Columbia University in 1946 and subsequently running on Broadway for six months in 1947, *The Medium* is about Madame Flora, a feigned medium who employs her daughter, Monica, and a mute servant boy named Toby, to create the supernatural affects that make her clients believe that they are communicating with their dead loved ones. When Madame Flora feels a hand around her throat in the middle of one of her séances, she flies into a fearful rage, refusing to believe in the ghostly forces that she fabricates and sells.

Laura Alley's production transforms the altar of St. Peter's Church in Chelsea into a hazy, stifled 1940s apartment. Smoke, dramatic film noir-esque lighting, and screens cloak the set in mystery and the fear of the unknown. *The Medium* needs a stark contrast between the humdrum of the everyday – the dusty apartment, the youthful Monica and Toby, and the abusive Madame Flora - and the otherworldly – the séance drenched in purple and red lighting, Madame Flora's gravitas, Monica and Toby's intrigues, and the yearnings of Mr. and Mrs. Gobineau and Mrs. Nolan, who are desperate to communicate with their dead children. Alley extracts all of these elements with subtlety, highlighting the duplicity that is Madame Flora's downfall.

Judith Skinner triumphs as Madame Flora. Her voice is that of a true, organ-like contralto. With her, one cannot really talk of "chest voice" as her impressively sensuous instrument is a miraculous extension of her speech. This power translates well into the role of the over-bearing, maniacal Flora. Skinner is absolutely terrifying in the murderous second act, a prolonged mad scene for Madame Flora. **Michael Megliola**'s erratic and melodramatic lighting is the perfect backdrop of Skinner's wild, unrestrained acting and singing. This wasn't gestural, vapid opera acting at its worst, but a visceral emanation of mortal fear through bellowing chest tones and granite-tinged high notes.

I would be surprised to learn that **Kate Oberjat**'s was a day over fifteen, so well did she embody Monica's youth and naïvete. Her voice is youthful, honest, and secure. Monica's Waltz, perhaps the best known aria from this opera, usually feels overly long and static despite Menotti's expertise at switching from atonal conversation to Puccinian melodic thrust. Oberjat, with the help of **Aaron Berk** as the mute, took us on this childlike, fantastical journey of Monica and Toby's games of pretend and their nascent love.

Of the three of Madame Flora's grieving customers, **Caroline Tye** as Mrs. Nolan, a widow who is desperate to speak to her deceased teenage daughter, was outstanding. Although her singing was shaky at times, her reaction to hearing what she believed to be her daughter's voice was captivating in its heart-breaking realness. **Brian Henry** and **Meredith Buchholtz** as Mr. and Mrs. Gobineau were uneven. Both are capable actors, but where Buchholtz sings with depth and meaning, Henry was utilitarian and barely audible in the more dramatic sections, even in this small space.

The greatest strength of this production was the impeccably clear diction. It hadn't even occurred to me until halfway through Act I that they were not using supertitles and, why should there be? Being understood and communicating clearly is an interpreter's most important duty. Credit is also due to Maestro **Carmine Aufiero** who extracted a variety of textures, moods, and colors from such a small orchestra, taking real advantage of the excellent acoustics of St. Peter's Church without overwhelming the singers.