

SUSANNAH

By Carlisle Floyd

Hello, I'm Edgar Loessin with Loessin at Large.

A good theatrical production magically transports us to a different place. And so it is with this finely etched version of Carlisle Floyd's musical drama, directed with sensitivity and boldness by Dorothy Danner. The stage is dominated by two barren mountains designed by Erhard Rom. These are not pretty sound of music hills. They are oppressive and confining. They define New Hope Valley Tennessee, and isolate the people who live there.

The action begins with a square dance. It's the middle of July and the older ladies complain of the heat, One says it's just like before a cloud burst.. These details foreshadow what is to come in this taut, emotionally gripping, tale of lies, betrayal and destruction of innocence.

Nineteen year old Susannah is oblivious to the gossip going on around her as she is to the leers of the men lusting after her ripe womanhood. An itinerant preacher, The Reverend Olin Blitch, arrives to conduct a revival. He, too, is quickly attracted to Susannah. Lillian Sengphiel captures the essence of this hardy mountain girl who manages to find beauty in her hard scrabble life. Her big soprano was inappropriately strident a time of two and yet she expresses the wide range of emotional traumas of Susannah with moving reality.

The day after the dance Susannah is discovered bathing nude in a secluded creek on her own property by the church elders looking for a Baptismal place. The cloud burst the ladies talked about happens. It's not rain but emotional hysteria that enflames the men and ultimately the whole community including the reverend Blitch whose lust over comes him. She is declared evil and possessed by the devil and publicly denounced. Her innocence is forever destroyed and her own potential for cruelty is unearthed.

Susannah's brother Sam, who eases his way through life with alcohol, tries to explain to her the persecution she will undergo. He sings:

"It's about the way people is made, I reckon
And how they like to believe what's bad.
And how short they are on lovin' kindness.
It must make the good Lord sad.

This aria is what the opera is about and the excellent Patrick Miller gives it a memorable rendition.

The Reverend Olin Blitch, like all of Floyd's characters, is a multidimensional man with spiritual strength and weaknesses of the flesh in conflict. Marc Embree finds the pain and agony of this lonely man who pays the ultimate price for his

transgression most successfully. Eric Johnson is winning and touching as Susannah's friend and would be suitor.

This is fine company of singers who bring us mountain folk who are overcome by ultraconservative misjudgment. It's a frailty that we are all vulnerable to. Their singing is rich in nuance and dramatic dynamics.

Carlisle Floyd writes beautiful, easily accessible music that is highly dramatic and theatrical. He is a skilled librettist who could easily write straight plays if he chose to do so.

Conductor Joseph Walsh guided the orchestra with dramatic flare and excitement. SUSANNAH is a rare theatrical happening for Hampton Roads that should not be missed. It offers an abundance of theatrical values that make it highly satisfying entertainment on many diverse levels.

This is Edgar Loessin with Loessin at Large and I'll see you at the next opening.