

Composer Glass illuminates the art of operas

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Glass' contemporaries.

"A Composer's Notes: Philip Glass and the Making of an Opera" is a documentary on the composer at the peak of his form, as he goes through the various processes of creating and producing "Akhnaten," his third opera.

In this 1986 film, the cameras of producer/director Michael Blackwood shadowed Glass for three years during the conception, composition, and all the way through to the first public performances of

"Akhnaten." Glass is followed to Egypt, where pharaoh Akhnaten held his controversial throne, to India, and New York, and finally to Germany and Houston for the World and American premieres of "Akhnaten" in full performance.

But the main focus of the film is the opera "Akhtanen." Akhnaten was an unusual human being.

Although there is some doubt as to whether Akhnaten was a guy or not, which is a major point in the performance and costuming, he was undoubtedly a strange, unique individual. Sophocles' "Oedipus" myth is said to be based on the real-life story of Akhnaten, which gave Glass the initial inspiration for the opera.

Centuries ago, Akhnaten was an Egyptian pharaoh who had a radical approach to nearly every-

thing, including his personal life and methods of governing his people. He broke down Egypt's multi-theological system of religion and enforced a one-god philosophy on the country — one of the first recorded instances of monotheism in world history. He also carried on a simultaneous relationship with his Queen, Neferiti, and his mother.

What was possibly the strangest aspect of Akhnaten was his oft-remarked-upon appearance. The actors portraying him in the operas wore hip padding and false breasts in an effort to recreate his feminine appearance and thin upper torso. The film also shows a costume being fitted with a false penis to go along with his unorthodoxly misproportioned body.

But Akhnaten's reign was

short-lived, however, and records of it were even shorter. His palace, city, and kingdom were destroyed by rivals to his throne, and after his death, virtually all record or memory of Akhnaten and his reign were eliminated.

The film climaxes with the Houston and Stuttgart performances being contrasted against each other, so one can see the similarities in the works and Glass' indelible stamp on each production, as well as the striking variations in the two very different performances.

Possibly the most interesting facet of the movie is watching the creative process of Glass' composition. He is seen in conversations with stage directors, costume designers, librettists, actors, and virtually all of the various people that

go into making a stage production.

This is one of the most fascinating parts of the film, and Glass, in both at-the-time interviews and narration dubbed in later, comments on how his compositions come about, and how this is fit into the overall text of the opera at large.

The film is, at times, hard to follow for anyone who doesn't know the names or positions of all of the various directors, librettists, singers, musicians and other collaborators Glass has conversations with, but is generally a well-made look at one of contemporary classical music's biggest names.

"A Composer's Notes" is showing this weekend at Sheldon Film Theatre as part of Sheldon's Film/Video showcase on the films of Michael Blackwood.

'Flowers in the Attic' withers; Andrews' novel a fuller bloom

By Micki Haller
Staff Reporter

For people who have already read V.C. Andrews' "Flowers in the Attic," the movie will be predictable and disappointing. Those who haven't read the book will find the film pointless, unmotivated and confusing.

Movie Review

It seems to be a universal law that movies are never as good as the books that spawn them.

Andrews' book explored a world where good doesn't conquer evil and

the sins of parents are doomed to be repeated by the children.

In the movie, the themes aren't fully developed, and the moviegoer is left wondering why things are happening the way they are.

The loving family — Mother, Daddy, Cathy, Chris and the twins, Cory and Carrie — is emotionally destroyed when Daddy is killed in an accident.

Mother, played by Victoria Tennant, decides she can't make it alone, so she takes the family home to meet the grandparents.

However, Mother has done something to make her parents very angry: She married her uncle.

The grandmother, played by Louise Fletcher, is a Bible-toting sadist who locks the children in a room leading to an attic while Mother tries to win back the love of her father and inherit his millions.

Mother eventually stops visiting her children, and the teen-aged Cathy and Chris become parents to their much younger siblings.

In the end, good triumphs over evil, and the children apparently live happily ever after, despite a few bad memories about Grandmother and the attic.

The movie centers on Cathy and Chris's struggle to take care of the twins. Cathy, played by Kristy Swanson, notices the peculiar changes in Mother, while her brother Chris, played by Jeb Adams, ignores her greed.

Swanson's Cathy is indignant with righteous convictions; it's also called overacting. On the way to the grandparents' home, she makes a dramatic speech about why the children should have had a pet.

"Pets die," she said. Someone should have prepared them for the fact that fathers die too, she said. Apparently, a pet's death would have provided a learning experience and prepared the kids for Daddy's death.

Fletcher speaks like a space alien from late-night TV. After calling the children "devil's spawn" and dispensing with other niceties, she stiffly smirks and leaves the room.

Adams doesn't seem to be acting. His natural responses are a welcome relief, but he doesn't seem to be doing much anyway.

The movie provokes little praise. The book isn't much more than the price of an evening admission, and there are better ways to spend an hour and 40 minutes.

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