

Ravishingly reborn, Scott Joplin's 'Treemonisha' triumphs at the Luminato Festival

Featuring a new libretto and a winning cast, this extraordinary production makes the case for the King of Ragtime's long-forgotten opera.

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By **Joshua Chong** Staff Reporter Sun., June 11, 2023



Treemonisha



By Scott Joplin, with a new story and libretto by Leah-Simone Bowen and Cheryl L. Davis, directed by Weyni Mengesha. Until June 17 at the St. Lawrence Centre for the Performing Arts, 27 Front St. E. luminatofestival.com

That Scott Joplin never lived to see a fully staged production of “Treemonisha” is one of the greatest blights in American music.

The King of Ragtime’s 1911 composition is arguably his most enterprising work, a foray into grand opera that draws on classical music influences along with folk, blues and his signature ragtime style. Yet his multiple attempts to mount the opera were futile.

Only in 1972, some five decades after Joplin’s death in 1917, was the opera first staged. It’s taken another 50-odd years, however, for “Treemonisha” to come into its own.

For at [Toronto’s Luminato Festival](http://luminatofestival.com), Joplin’s long-forgotten masterpiece has been ravishingly reborn for the 21st century in a triumphant production that opened Saturday at the St. Lawrence Centre for the Performing Arts.

Featuring a new libretto and a winning cast, this version of “Treemonisha” makes a strong case that it should be the definitive one. At the very least, director Weyni Mengesha’s landmark production proves the opera belongs among the seminal works of the modern era.

The success of this “Treemonisha” begins with Canadian playwright Leah-Simone Bowen, who penned a new story to accompany Joplin’s music and co-wrote the libretto with Cheryl L. Davis.

While Joplin’s ingenious score has been rightfully lauded, critics and audiences have historically effused less praise for his libretto. Too simple, too obvious, his story of a young, educated Black woman who becomes leader of her community in the post-Reconstruction South was boldly feminist for its era, but lacks nuance and thematic depth.

No one, however, has attempted to rewrite the story of “Treemonisha” to the scale that Bowen and Davis have done. “Ambitious” seems too light an adjective to describe their work, which injects the “Treemonisha” with a timeless universality and adds complex themes of self-hate, Black identity and intergenerational trauma.

The backstory of the titular character remains largely untouched: as a newborn baby, Treemonisha (Neema Bickersteth) is placed in a hollow tree by her mother, Priscilla, who is shot and killed after fleeing a nearby plantation. Adopted by Monisha (Andrea Baker) and her husband Ned (Nicholas Davis), Treemonisha is raised unaware of her birth story and biological mother.

She lives among the freedmen, a group of farmers and tradespeople hostile to the neighbouring Maroons, feared by Treemonisha’s people for their Hoodoo beliefs.

While in Joplin’s original story, Treemonisha is abducted by these conjurers, she is afforded more agency by Bowen and Davis, instead torn in a love triangle between her unlovable fiancé Remus (Ashley Faatoalia) and the Maroon Zodzerick (Cedric Berry).

Treemonisha's conflict grows after she learns about her origin story on her wedding day: when Treemonisha was born, her birth mother also left behind a bag of luck, almost identical to the one gifted to her by Zodzerick. Could she, too, be a Maroon, the very people she is taught to despise?

As the title character, Bickersteth is a standout in a brilliant cast, setting out on Treemonisha's journey of self-discovery with starry-eyed conviction and delivering her multiple arias with shimmering beauty. Canadian singer SATE, with her earthy and soulful timbre, is also a revelation as Nana Buluku, the leader of the Maroons and from whom Treemonisha seeks counsel. Fantastic, too, are Baker as Monisha and Kristin Renee Young as Treemonisha's sister, Lucy.

The terrific 23-member company is aided by some vibrant staging by Mengesha, who again proves she is one of the few directors who can tame the unwieldy Bluma Appel Theatre. Esie Mensah's choreography more than fills Camellia Koo's evocative sets (with additional designs by Rachel Forbes), which covers the floor with sand and features dangling ropes twisted together to evoke the dense Arkansan forests.

Joplin's music itself defies categorization. Syncopated ragtime rhythms collide with tuneful folk melodies; lyrical arias, no doubt influenced by the great Italian and German works, are juxtaposed with spiritual call-and-response numbers.

What makes or breaks "Treemonisha," however, is its orchestrations. Only Joplin's piano accompaniment have survived, meaning composers have had to craft new orchestrations based on that existing material.

In the 1970s, American Gunther Schuller encumbered Joplin's light score with blistering Wagnerian orchestrations, treating "Treemonisha" as heady European opera. In 2011, Rick Benjamin went the opposite route with a ragtime-inspired accompaniment.

Neither, are utterly convincing.

Jessie Montgomery and Jannina Norpoth's fresh orchestrations for this production, conducted by Kalena Bovell, are the first to meet Joplin's music on its own terms. Historically European instruments share the stage with West African percussion, creating a sound that, like Joplin's score, blends a variety of styles.

This production, however, isn't faultless. There are times it feels there isn't enough music for Bowen and Davis's dense libretto, brimming with ideas. And some scenes, particularly turning points in the second act, are played with too much comedy.

Still, it's impossible not to surrender to the magic of "Treemonisha." It's quite the coup that Luminato and TO Live managed to land this world premiere, produced by Toronto-based Volcano. No fewer than 10 illustrious companies around the world have signed on as co-commissioners. There's no doubt that this reimagined version has more life ahead.

It's also not lost on me how life imitates art. The opera's generation-spanning journey out of obscurity and into the spotlight is not unlike that of Treemonisha herself, left by one parent and nurtured by another. Some 100 years later, Bowen and her team are writing the wrongs of music history, finishing what Joplin started.

I can only imagine what the King of Ragtime would make of this “Treemonisha.” It’s probably beyond his wildest dreams, in the best possible way.