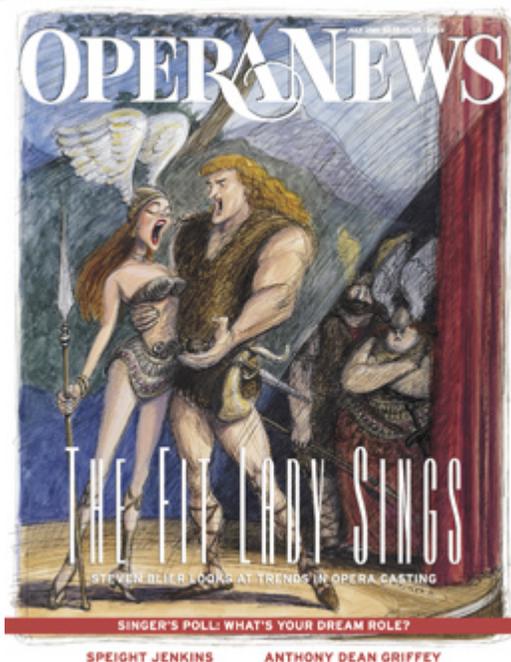


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NEW YORK CITY

Opera met *The X-Files* on March 24, when the Riverside Opera Ensemble presented the world premiere of Patrick Byers's two-act drama *Incident at San Bajo*, with libretto by Peter Bennett. The six surviving residents of the San Bajo trailer park tell of a whistling drifter, Maxlin, who poisoned the park's water supply, then offered to sell the residents an antidote. The survivors were the only ones to buy it.

Paxton (Daryl Henriksen) is an alcoholic wreck with a voice like holy Moses, stumbling through his memories, desperate to forget. Crystal, the town seer (Elvira Green, a rich-toned contralto) is a Cassandra whose second sight has been blocked ever since she failed to warn the town that

they would die the next day. Like Mother Abigail in Stephen King's *The Stand*, her visions are haunted by the winking face of the devil -- in this case, Maxlin.

Vera (Sherry Zannoth) spends most of the opera shuffling about in a housecoat and red wig, with a never-lit cigarette, stunned by the events that shattered her sleepy little life. Zannoth's expressive soprano delivered a powerful, chilling world-weariness and hard-headed Yankee practicality. As Giles, a biker wanna-be suffering from a fatal Oedipal complex, bass Derrick Ballard anchored each ensemble with his firm, black-toned voice.

Randall Schloss and Heide Holcomb performed a neat duet as Derek and Joanie, candidates for world's happiest opera couple (if there were such an award). His baritone was mellow and manly, her soprano high, almost lacerating in its forced good cheer. Quasi-devout quasi-deviants, they pranced happily about the stage in lingerie -- a Marlon Brando T-shirt and boxers for him, a zip-up corset in lavender leopard print with black faux-leather trim for her.

Byers sets this bleak story against strings, plucked bass and exotic percussion -- music that sweeps and sighs like sand blowing over the empty trailer slabs. The score begins with the six voices unfolding different melodies against a sparse orchestral background. This recalls the opening of Schoenberg's *Moses und Aron*, in which a similar chorus portrays the Burning Bush. Individual themes and rhythms are heard for each character as they tell a different part of the story -- including a whistled "Maxlin theme" which sounds suspiciously like "Do You Know the Muffin Man?"

Characters and themes are brought out individually, an approach which makes Act I sound herk-a-jerk. The music intensifies and coheres in the second as the characters recall Maxlin and the horrors of the morning when "only six of them woke up." But the final scene brings all the themes together in a smooth, flowing quilt of sound, ending in silence.

PAUL J. PELKONEN