



Dvorak's dark side set to light up the stage

By Jessica Duchen

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I'm all for cats at the opera – a fuzzy feline will always raise a smile. But isn't there something alarming about it when a mermaid meets one? We all know what cats do to fish. It looks as if that might happen to the unfortunate Rusalka, the eponymous heroine of Dvorak's post-Wagnerian take on *The Little Mermaid*, in the opera's first-ever production at the Royal Opera House.

Rusalka is a grand-scale epic, a seriously dark fairy tale, its ending notable for its bleak lack of redemption. A co-production with the Salzburg Festival, Covent Garden's staging is headed by the long-established directorial duo of Jossi Wieler and Sergio Morabito, with Samantha Seymour as revival director. They have clearly been having some fun transforming Dvorak's bizarrely neglected masterpiece for the age of postmodern regietheater, or "director's opera". It is filled with Freudian subtexts and timeless mythical symbols.

"Everybody knows the Andersen tale of *The Little Mermaid*," says Morabito. "We are trying to go with that and to be playful with it." The physical sets are complemented by film projections, which apparently include a jellyfish floating past during *Rusalka*'s famous "Song to the Moon" while the giant cat is played by a dancer.

It seems odd that *Rusalka* should be new to the UK's leading opera house. Perhaps its sinister qualities have proved daunting; or perhaps it is too

derivative of Wagner. Then there's the awkwardness of singing in Czech. And there's the paradox that the heroine, struck mute by the witch, sings not one note for half of the second act.

'Rusalka', Royal Opera House, London, WC2, (www.roh.org.uk) from Monday until 14 March