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Verdi's "Un Ballo in Maschera" -- "A Masked Ball" -- is a good example of how great artists never coast.

The maestro had it all in the late 1850s: Triple successes with "Rigoletto," "Trovatore" and "Traviata" in the early '50s, great wealth, a nice house, newly married, acclaimed as the heir to Rossini as the king of Italian opera.

So what's he do? He writes an opera that breaks the musical rules he established and he can't get it past the censors because it's too hot politically. The result is one of his most imaginative pieces, and the Minnesota Opera gives it a dazzling presentation at the Ordway Center this week.

The production, which opened the company's 45th season Saturday night, is packed with vivid imagery, relentlessly powerful music and moments of almost bizarre comic lightness. Loosely based on the 18th century killing of the Swedish king, it's a show without heroes. All the major characters are deeply flawed -- Gustavo is a kind but ineffective monarch; his friend and aide Anckarstrom is prone to both excessive compassion and domestic violence, and the latter's wife, Amelia, is having an affair with the king and doesn't really acknowledge it, even to herself. Verdi makes them strongly empathetic characters, complex in psychological as well as musical ways. You care deeply about what's going to happen in that inevitable final scene, which is as ritualistic as the bloody end of "Carmen."

Sung in Italian with English translation projected above the stage, "A Masked Ball" opened Saturday night at the Ordway Center and continues through the 2 p.m. matinee Sunday. For tickets, call (612) 333-6669 or go online to [www.mnopera.org](http://www.mnopera.org).

Director James Robinson and designer Allen Moyer chose to work with the original version of Verdi's score, set in Sweden rather than in Boston of all places -- the composer had to make ridiculous changes to get it past the Roman censors in 1859. This allows Robinson, whose past credits include razor-sharp productions of "Nixon in China" and "Transatlantic," to give a European luxury to scenery and costumes, but with a contemporary approach. The king's Baroque ballroom deconstructs in later scenes to represent the gypsy camp and hanging grounds. I especially like how the ceiling, with its zodiacal ornament, is lowered in Act 3 to compress the action and ratchet up the pressure on the conspirators. Duane Schuler's provocative lighting contributes immensely to the tension in the air. Baritone Charles Taylor, making his company debut, rules the stage as Anckarstrom. Taylor has vocal power, impeccable Italian diction and a commanding presence. Evan Bowers, also making his company debut, is excellent as the strangely naive king, though he tends toward a lighter tenor and portrays Gustavo as a philandering lightweight. There'd be more pathos at the end if Bowers showed gravitas earlier. Soprano Cynthia Lawrence, a Metropolitan Opera regular who was last seen in the company's "Le Nozze di Figaro" in 2000, was especially strong in her mournful Act 3 aria, "Morro, ma prima in grazia."

Jill Grove is memorable as Ulrica, the gypsy fortune-teller, but the show-stealer is Nili Riemer, who did the same in "Tales of Hoffmann" at the Ordway last year. Riemer is perfect as Oscar, one of the king's attendants, who appears to have walked straight out of a Mozart opera buffa and into middle-period Verdi. Robinson takes full advantage of how Oscar adds a French opera charm and ambiguity to an otherwise noir tale. Riemer was an unforgettable Olympia in "Hoffmann," and her easy coloratura and sparkling stage presence make her ideal in this role.

The score is filled with some eccentric special effects, such as the “laughing chorus” that ends Act 2, and conductor Miguel Harth-Bedoya and his musicians take full advantage.