

A lot has happened in the world of finance since *The Bonfire of the Vanities*, Tom Wolfe's satirical novel about the downfall of an avaricious young Manhattan banker, first appeared in 1987. And much of what happened isn't very good, which makes the novel especially timely in an age when US presidential candidates rant against 'hedge fund guys'. Now it's an opera, and an engaging one at that. The composer, Stefania de Kenessey, was trained at Yale and Princeton and mentored by the forbidding serialist Milton Babbitt. At a time when many composers understandably feel that music has reached the limits of where it can go, de Kenessey has reverted more radically than most by embracing—of all things for a Babbitt student—an appealing and easy-going pop style. (It may bear mentioning that Babbitt had a passion for Jerome Kern.)

At the second of two performances at EL MUSEO DEL BARRIO on October 10, I was at first put off by what seemed like lightweight musical material and by a structure that looked as if it might be a revue-like succession of musical numbers without connecting material. Yet in the first number Judy McCoy—wife of the ill-fated banker Sherman McCoy—sang to their child a lullaby about a father who 'doesn't make a thing' but 'slices other people's cake'. At once the song was melodically alluring and alerted one to the potential of Michael Bergmann's caustically witty libretto. Concerns over structure faded too, since the musical numbers, abetted by de Kenessey's skilfully wrought text-settings, did succeed in advancing the action—and in a musically engaging manner.



■ Randal Turner and Anne-Carolyn Bird as Sherman and Judy in the premiere of Stefania de Kenessey's *'Bonfire of the Vanities'*

The plot stems from Sherman's involvement—in the company of a woman with whom he was having an affair—in a hit-and-run accident in the Bronx, an event that simultaneously lands him in legal trouble, shatters his marriage and sets social and racial forces against him. Oddly, the opera moves quickly from the accident to Sherman's arrest, without prolonging the anguish he experiences as he wonders if the law will catch up with him. More important, I wish de Kenessey's musical palette had been a bit more inclusive, though you never really tire of the familiar, engaging syncopations (I heard tango rhythms more than once). And there are a number of inventive moments, such as

when Sherman, now an inmate of the jail at Rikers Island, responds to a beating by inmates with a lilting song in 6/8 reminiscent of Gilbert and Sullivan. Another operatic parody occurs when the sudden death of an investor at a cocktail party triggers a big ensemble. In an amusing update to Wolfe, Sherman's colleagues sing rapturously of a new, complex security—Future Investment Security Instruments, or FISIs, which, of course, crash before the opera is over.

A clever staging by Bergmann brought the opera fully to life. Projections convincingly evoked New York settings, from the Manhattan skyline at night to the Bronx criminal court. The large and accomplished cast was headed by Randal Turner (Sherman), Anne-Carolyn Bird (Judy), Kyle Van Schoonhoven (the hard-drinking reporter Fallow), Yingjie Zhou (Sherman's mistress Maria) and Adrienne Danrich (the black lawyer Tamara, who saves Sherman from a prison sentence), all of whom gave compelling performances. The conductor Daniela Candillari capably presided over an 18-member orchestra. On the way out, a colleague opined, 'there's a talent there, but maybe it's for Broadway'. Yet as musicals make an ever stronger claim for inclusion in the opera repertoire, an enterprising company would do well to give de Kenessey's new opera a look. GEORGE LOOMIS