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(MIRAMAX)

Color/1.85/Dolby

90 Mins.

Cast: John Hurt, Sophie Ward, Theresa Russell, Buck Henry, Anita Morris, Beverly D'Angelo, Elizabeth Hurley, Peter Birch, Bridget Fonda, James Mathers, Linzi Drew, Amy Johnson, Tilda Swinton, Spencer Leigh.

Credits: Directed by Robert Altman, Bruce Beresford, Bill Bryden, Jean-Luc Godard, Derek Jarman, Franc Roddam, Nicolas Roeg, Ken Russell, Charles Sturridge, Julien Temple. Produced by Don Boyd. Executive producers: Jim Mervis, Tom Kuhn, Charles Mitchell. Co-producers: Al Clark, Mike Watts. A Lightyear Entertainment/Virgin Vision presentation.

An ambitious undertaking in the ongoing battle to bring opera to the screen results in a true cinematic oddity. The curiously vapid contributions of most of the directors involved won't help the cause. 88-65

The notion of letting ten directors make short, individual films accompanied by their favorite operatic arias is an audacious and rather tantalizing one. However, judging from the results on the screen, this may have been an idea better left unconsummated. As visually arresting as these mini-movies may be (most of these artists are known for their scenic eye), almost all of them are singularly lacking in any true inspiration or dramatic force. Instead of a series of luscious, witty divertissements, we get an arid, aimless succession of chicly photographed doodles (more MTV than La Scala in quality) which, for the most part, have little relation to the effulgent music flooding the soundtrack. In fact, despite the awesome power of cinema, it is the music which emerges the victor in this uncertain meeting of the arts.

Bruce Beresford's and Derek Jarman's contributions are picturesque, period. Robert Altman's Rameau concoction is a completely negligible Grand Guignol *Sweeney Todd/Amadeus* blend, especially dismaying coming from a director who has shown such musical sensitivity in the past. Ken Russell selects Puccini's gorgeous "Nessun Dorma," and predictably trashes it as luridly as he did the lives of Tchaikovsky and Liszt with some hideous pseudo-mystical nonsense involving a car crash and resultant surgery. Jean-Luc Godard sets his Lully piece in a Parisian body-builder's paradise and what begins as fitfully amusing soon ends in a screeching self-parody eminently suitable for "Saturday Night Live." Nicolas Roeg's elaborate Verdi confection has a clunkingly obvious "old-fashioned" quality to it and is further marred by Theresa Russell's hapless, *au courant* male impersonation, in which she resembles nothing so much as a woman in drag. Julien Temple exercises his signature continuous tracking camera in a Verdi pastiche which is something of a hate letter to American bad taste. His set is the most garish motel ever dreamt up and his rambunctious cast includes Buck Henry, Anita Morris and a ravishing Beverly D'Angelo; they all do funny things but the silliness is overextended.

Two standouts: Charles Sturridge uses his Verdi composition to underline the evanescent adventure of three North London school-children playing truant. The sketchy black-and-white visuals, dreamlike, rhythmic editing and final plot fillip beautifully match the intensity and mystery of the music. Franc Roddam, creator of the memorable, rock-charged *Quadrophenia*, takes Wagner's "Liebestod," surely the most overworked aria in film, and manages to do something compelling and powerfully erotic with it. The elements in his employ may seem banal—a beautiful blonde young couple on the road, driving through Las Vegas, making love in a motel room suffused with high-noon neon from the street—but his passionate use of color, sensuously glancing detail, and no-frills narrative amount to a highly effective retelling of the immortal "love-death."

Interwoven throughout is Bill Bryden's pretentious "wrap-around" sequence featuring wraith-like John Hurt as the most unconvincing "Pagliacci" imaginable. Adding to the cornball artifice of the conception is the use of a recording of Caruso to which Hurt mimes his final death throes on an empty stage.

—David Noh