Jonathan Richmond and Eric Ristad disagreed over the merits of the new American Repertory Theatre production of *The Juniper Tree*. To avert our critics staking a duel, we've decided to print reviews by both and let you be the judge. Go and see the show, then write and tell us who you agree with — we'll look forward to publishing your letters.

Artifice makes reality shine brighter

**The Juniper Tree**, music by Philip Glass and Robert Moran, libretto by Arthur Yorinks, directed by Andrei Serban with conductor Richard Pittman; The Baltssee by Jean Genet, directed by Jannie Akkeh, both productions in repertory at the American Repertory Theater; The Acme Center, Harvard.

The American Repertory Theater World Premiere production of *The Juniper Tree* has its flaws, but must be seen.

The opera — based on a tale by the Brothers Grimm — tells the story of a wicked stepmother who decapitates her stepson, cooks him up for dinner, and serves him to his unsuspecting father. Transformed into a bird, he flies from the Juniper Tree, his song earning the stepmother a millstone with which to crush the Juniper tree. From there, events bring out deep realities that transcend the limitations of the real world. The Juniper tree is transformed into a vortex of the plot, there are no barriers of space or time that can prevent the action from moving from one place to another. The artificiality of the fairy tale is left behind, and there is a sense of timelessness. The Juniper tree is a symbol of the past, present, and future, and it is the backdrop for the action of the opera. The Juniper tree is a source of evil and corruption, but it is also a source of beauty and redemption. The Juniper tree is a symbol of the human condition, and it is a symbol of the power of love and redemption.

To summarize: the American Repertory Theatre production of *The Juniper Tree* has no redeeming qualities. The central theme of the opera and the fairy tale is revealed by the Brothers Grimm doesn't deserve dramatic mention. Worse still, the actual content base of the operatic production was insubstantial, on a kindergarten reading level, and inferior to the original fairy tale. Arthur Yorinks' text stressed the fairy tale's peripheral bits, e.g., the deliber- ate, gory, premeditated murder of the son by the stepmother. Indeed, the opera's composers, Philip Glass and Robert Moran, admit to viewing fairy tales as primarily tales of child abuse. Performing *Goldilocks and the Three Bears* and *Rumpelstiltskin*, previously my favorite fairy tales, now can be classified as gothic romances. It is well known that fairy tales are any- thing but benign; paks typically include elements of child abuse/molesta- tion, sadism, and melancholy. All of this makes the operatic production a tragi-comic exercise, and thereby trivializes a fairy tale whose true value lies in its plot and its lyrics.

The fairy tale's plot, in my opinion, one of its less important aspects. Such famed and honored writers and critics as George Herbert Head, Jr., and John Gardner, author of *Grendel*, are in agreement with this.

There was no acting in *The Juniper Tree*, only the preprogrammed human me- chanics. The introduction of the Year's Whirl, Arthur Yorinks' version of Wil- lert Wilson's *The Divinest Child*. The singers, in most cases, must live off what they have, as a whole, weak, unable to articulate or dictate, incapable of projecting into the theatre, Drama Stage, and had trouble breathing. At times a spotlight would highlight a singer's tight- lipped scene or expose a crooked mouth — choking the singer's air, and with it the requsite passion. Most of the time, however, I wanted to put them out of my misery. Frequently, 'tis an ill wind that blows none good. The production is merely the ages of the Juniper tree's dramatic disappointments. That is to say, all the pe- ripheral aspects of truly great opera and theatre were replaced with lavish finan- cial attention.