

The Paris Opera

What one might call the “institutional” documentary has its most avid exponent in the venerable Frederick Wiseman, who has been making them for 50 years. More recently, Wiseman has taken on major cultural institutions—as in “La Danse” (2009) and “National Gallery” (2014) —after years of observing more pedestrian entities. Other such efforts have included “Music from the Inside Out” and “The New Rikjsmueum,” both of which mix the just-the-facts camera of Wiseman (no interviews, no narration) with more conventional styles showing a mosaic of the featured institution.

Latest of this type is “The Paris Opera,” conceived by Jean Stéphane Bron, which shows a rough year-in-the-life of one of France’s (and of the world’s) great artistic operations, and it is fascinating to behold (*in French with subtitles*).

Leading the operation is director Stéphane Lissner, a rotund, silver-haired fellow who must make all the parts work and must make them work in two contexts, because the collective “Paris Opera” is uniquely split among two venues for its performances, the Palais Garnier and the Palais Bastille. He is the guy who contends with tricky schedules, disaffected unions, the Ministry of Culture, fiscal pressures, and a host of outside forces to make sure the show goes on.

And the show that goes on is fascinating. In varied segments, we see prepping and performances of the grandiose Schoenberg opera, “Moses and Aaron” (complete with a real bull as the “golden calf”), the classic ballet “La Bayadere,” the Opera’s Youth Orchestra, and ongoing productions of “The Damnation of Faust,” “Rigoletto,” and “Die Meistersinger von Nürnberg.” A series of most amiable professionals (e.g., singers Bryn Terfel and Gerald Finley) interact with another star of the documentary, the youthful and brilliant music director Philippe Jordan, a conductor with smarts, panache, and a great smile. He is a paragon of the creative spirit, urging his performers to display their best.

There are also intriguing sub-stories in the film. One of the best is the Opera’s discovery of a young (21 years old) Russian baritone Mikhail Timoshenko, who is selected to participate in their Youth Academy and who plunges in—knowing no French—to learn his craft. His enthusiasm shines through and his exposure to mentors like Terfel are priceless to watch. Another moody character, the director of ballet Benjamin Millepied, clashes with his charges but still mounts intriguing works. And, most dramatically: the lead for “Die Meistersinger” cancels with two days to opening, and Lissner and his staff scramble for a replacement in a most difficult role—which they find in the person of a genial German baritone who saves the day!

Besides the creative artists of the company, Bron doesn’t neglect the people behind the scenes, showing set makers, seamstresses, back stage and production folk, and—to sweetly wrap up the show: the custodial crew cleaning up the theater stage and seats...

(This film is not rated but contains nothing objectionable, runs 110 mins.)

(October 2017)