

# The New York Times

MUSIC REVIEW

## Humbert Humbert (Conjuring Nymphet)



Michelle V. Agins/The New York Times

**Lolita: An Imagined Opera:** The actor François Beukelaers at Montclair State University.

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MONTCLAIR, N.J. — Part of the brilliance of Nabokov’s “Lolita,” that scandalous, disconcerting novel in which a middle-aged European man of culture takes pedophilic liberties with an adolescent American girl, resides in its manifold layers of ambiguity, its openness to interpretation. Is Humbert Humbert a suave, calculating seducer or a pretentious, delusional monster? Might he also be a relatable victim, not only of his own urges but also those of Dolores Haze, the child with whom he is obsessed?

“Lolita: An Imagined Opera,” presented in its American premiere on Friday night as part of Montclair State University’s vibrant Peak Performances series, adopts the monster view. The 70-minute work, composed by Joshua Fineberg and directed by Jim Clayburgh of the Belgian theater company Joji Inc., is less an opera in any conventional sense than a multimedia monodrama: the actor François Beukelaers, a Humbert caged within what amounts to a courtroom dock in front of the stage, recounts episodes from the book in chronological sequence.

Just as Humbert narrates Nabokov’s novel, so does this adaptation focus on Humbert’s representation of events. Mr. Beukelaers delivers most of his testimony with his back to the audience, peering into cameras that transfer his visage, with a jaundiced tint, onto a translucent screen above the stage. Bits of his narration, electronically distorted, swirled around the auditorium through loudspeakers, along with fragments of children’s songs and, eventually, the computer-rendered voice of Lolita herself.

Behind Mr. Beukelaers’s projected face, two dancers — Johanne Saunier, the choreographer, and Julie Verbinnen — flexed and twitched with a disconcerting mix of prurience and vulnerability. (Their blond wigs and heart-shaped