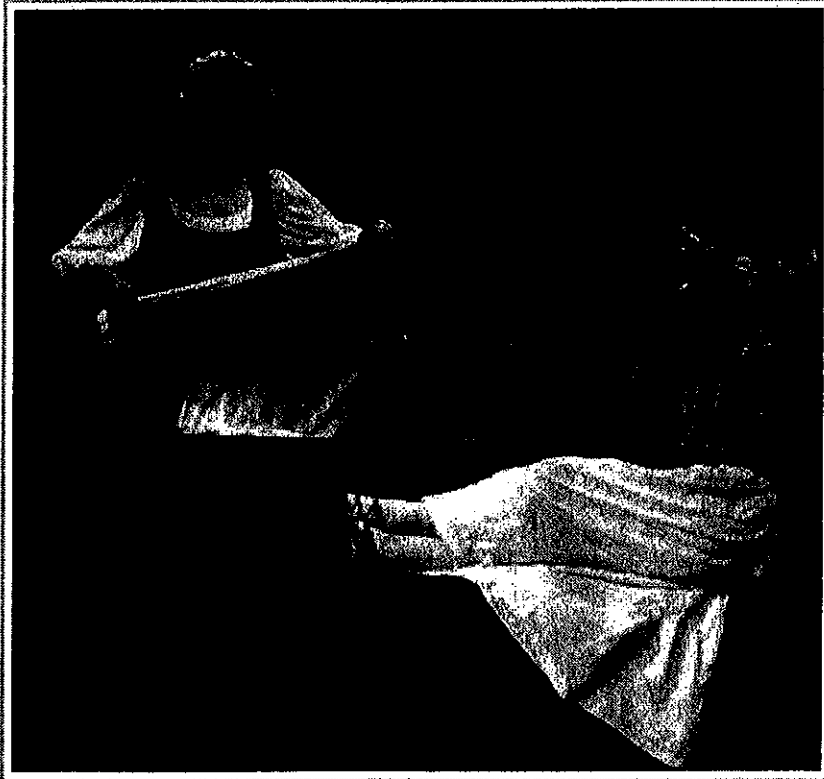




OPERA VILLE

WEDNESDAY, NOVEMBER 18, 2009

Opera San Jose's "La Cenerentola"



November 14, 2009

In addition to fielding the best-looking cast ever, Opera San Jose supplied its opening night of Rossini's "La Cenerentola" with some remarkably deft coloratura singing. It was an evening that the composer himself would have enjoyed immensely.

For a Rossinophile, there's no moment more suspenseful than the prima donna's opening aria, in which we discover if we're getting some authentic bel canto or a Verdi mezzo trying to stuff a whale through the neck of a bottle. Betany Coffland answered that question in about three seconds, embarking from Cenerentola's touching, folk-like theme song, "Una volta c'era un re" into a cadenza of lightness, agility and birdsong.

Ah, relief. The rest of the evening was sheer enjoyment, all the way through the final and brilliant aria, "Non piu mesta."

Another great enjoyment is Daniel Cilli as Dandini, the squire who pretends to be the Prince so the real Prince might read the true natures of his bridal candidates. Although Dandini is a largely comic figure, his bel canto requirements are demanding, and Cilli makes the most of it, demonstrating that, yes, there is such a thing as baritone coloratura. I also enjoyed his "speed recitatives" as he mightily compressed the Prince's life story.

Vocally, our Prince, tenor Michael Dailey, remains a puzzlement. He retains a covered tone in his lower range that bugs the heck out of me, but this same technique produces absolutely gorgeous top notes. His best moment came with the initial "flirting" duet with Coffland, "Un soave non so che." The two characters cross the stage toward each other even as their voices mingle in mid-air.

Comically, the evening is a veritable buffet of goofiness. At the center is bass-baritone Isaiah Musik-Ayala, who plays the oafish father, Don Magnifico, with a wry cynicism, and possesses that rare ability to sing as if he is actually just conversing. This makes for a good contrast with the kinetic hysterics of his daughters, Clorinda and Tisbe (soprano Rebecca Schuessler and mezzo Tori Grayum), two good-looking women who show no fear in playing ugly, helped greatly by the corkscrew wigs and grotesque makeup jobs by Sara Beukers.

Sandra Bengochea continues to make her mark as a stage director, pulling a tremendous amount of energy from her players. She also finds an ingenious solution to the second of Rossini's outmoded freeze-frame scenes, having the royal advisor Alidoro (bass Paul Murray) wander around engaging the robotic singers in gags, including a limbo contest and an Old West shootout. Brilliant.

Larry Hancock adds a nice layer of irony, both through his supertitles (my favorite: "Princikins!") and a final-act set design stolen from a Barbie Dream House, complete with thrones fashioned from butterfly wings (that's right - monarch butterflies). Anthony Quartuccio braved certain limb damage leading his orchestra through what must be the most quickly paced score ever created.

Through Nov. 29, California Theater, 345 S. First Street, San Jose.
\$51-\$91, 408/437-4450, <http://www.operasj.org/>

Image: Bettany Coffland and Tori Grayum as Cenerentola and Tisbe.
Photo by Pat Kirk.

Read Michael's new counterculture comedy, "The Monkey Tribe," at
<http://www.themonkeytribe.blogspot.com/>

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