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OPERA REVIEW: Magical melodies help "La traviata" capture hearts

by Mort Levine

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Depending on how much of an aficionado of Italian grammar you are, most likely you will settle for "the fallen woman" or "the lost one" as a subtitle for the Giuseppe Verdi operatic masterpiece, "La traviata." Technically, scholars advise it comes from using an Italian verb *traviare* ("to lead from the right path") in its feminine form so it means a lady who was diverted from the righteous direction.

In the Opera San Jose production which opened this past weekend at the California Theatre and will run through Feb. 26, this savvy lady very much seemed to lead her very independent path and had few qualms about making decisions. It's probably why the great Italian opera composer loved this heroine as he did many of his other young female protagonists who died tragic deaths.

Jouvanca Jean-Baptiste, whose soaring soprano thrilled the audience, clearly carried the opera. As Violetta Valery, she played a high-flying courtesan who begins and closes the opera as the kept mistress of Baron Douphol quite adequately sung by baritone Isaiah Musik-Ayala. Violetta's first act meet up with the lovesick tenor Alexander Boyer, singing Alfredo Germont, leads to sneaking off to a suburban hideaway for the second act where they engage in "open marriage," which shocked lots of people when Verdi set his opera in the 1850s. Didn't seem to shock people that much in the 1890s when this version was set. Nor did it have much resonance when Newt Gingrich's second wife said he wanted to keep on

living in that kind of relationship with Calista, a staff member (now wife No. 3).

Attitudes do change over the centuries but the drama of personal relationships are immutable. In Opera San Jose's current version that drama rarely gets ignited. Perhaps it was due to opening night jitters but Boyer's Alfredo seemed boyishly out of

when it came to sweeping the lady off her feet. It got better in subsequent acts. When Violetta's rather rapid onset of tuberculosis finally ends her life and the opera, some passionate heroics finally heated up the stage.

The Boyer high tenor vocalism has moments of real beauty that recall classic tenors like Jan Peerce or Alfredo Kraus who made this a signature role. The missing chemistry of two young lovers didn't extend to the great arias or duets. Boyer outdid himself in the opening toast, "Libiam ne lieti calici." He was firmly in command with his hymn to love "Di quell'amor." Jean-Baptiste took up the same theme with an impassioned "Ah, fors'e lui" where she dreams of a true love that might one day redeem her.

An outstanding rendition of Alfredo's father was sung by baritone Torlef Borsting. His bungled effort to break up the open marriage was followed by a realization of Violetta's imminent death and a reconciliation which came too late. His handling of the famed aria "Da Provenza il mar, il suol" was purest Verdi at his best and a show stopper.

The beauty of the music was captured by an outstanding orchestral effort. Maestro David Rohrbaugh, who knows this work inside and out, showed a sureness in helping the young singers surmount some of the trickier tempo changes.

Director Jose Maria Condemi kept to Verdi's clarity of a single moral purpose driving the plot of this outstanding example of Italian Romantic melodrama. He masterfully managed to smoothly move some



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massive party-goer scenes down to intimate two or three person exchanges.

Eric Flatmo created essentially a one-set production with some wizardry using large scale paintings including one of Jean-Baptiste looking like a John Singer Sargent painting of high society ladies.

A fine dance ensemble managed to convey the Spanish gypsy rhythms at the second party scene. It included Paola McCormick-Quintero, Maurice Monger, Robert Raney and Analisa Sabo.

The alternate cast performing on Feb. 18, 21 and 26 is headed by Rebecca Davis and Michael Dailey as the lovers, Evan Brummel as the senior Germont and Wendy Buzby as Violetta's friend Flora.

This ever-popular opera still has the ability to enchant on the vocalizing alone. The striking sets, colorful costumes and an intriguing story line are all bonuses. It remains the work of a master composer who had 300,000 fellow Italians line the streets of Milan at his funeral. How many of today's music makers can expect that kind of standing ovation when the final curtain comes down?

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