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Grand Opera – 'The Pearl Fishers' an impressive season opener

The young and exotically good-looking Ms. Lopez makes for a convincing Leila, and her siren voice is truly enchanting.



GREGORY M. ALONZO

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The Pearl Fishers



★★★★★

3.5 out of 5 stars - 'Sweet Stuff'

Opera San Jose

Directed by Richard Harrell

Music by Georges Bizet

Libretto by Michael Carre and Eugene Cormon

September 8-23, 2012

California Theatre

in French with English supertitles

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Tenor Alexander Boyer as Nadir with the Opera San José chorus in The Pearl Fishers.

George Bizet's *The Pearl Fishers* (1863) is an earlier work in the Parisian composer's relatively short career that, despite its own merit, will undoubtedly remain forever in the shadow of his phenomenally popular final masterpiece, *Carmen*.

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That's a shame, however, because its many inspired duets and haunting arias are vivid illustrations of Bizet's genius that should not be overlooked. Moreover, its economical narrative style, incorporating all of the classic, romanticized themes of forbidden passion, unrequited love, betrayal and death, provide a highly accessible and entertaining introduction to grand opera – in the French tradition.

The story, set in a fishing village in ancient Ceylon, begins with two close friends, hunter Nadir (lyric tenor Alexander Boyer) and village leader Zurga (baritone Evan Brummel), taking an eternal oath not to allow their obsessive desire for a beautiful priestess, Leila (soprano Cecilia Violetta Lopez), come to fruition and destroy their friendship.

Nadir and Zurga's poetic duet, "Au fond du temple saint," is the work's most renowned piece and is a recurring melody. It highlights Boyer's warm, mellifluous timbre and Brummel's pure, robust resonance, each complementing the other to full musical and dramatic effect.

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Of course, things go awry and Nadir quickly succumbs to Leila's ethereal beauty, thereby

placing the emotionally devastated Zurga in the onerous position of deciding the errant couple's fate. And, indeed, it all comes to a fatal, melodramatic conclusion. But the specific choices made by Zurga in the final moments are not only surprising but quite moving in their nobility and selflessness. Brummel's impressive

acting acumen in no small measure adds to the scene's visceral impact.

The young and exotically good-looking Ms. Lopez makes for a convincing Leila, and her siren voice is truly enchanting. She never falters, displaying a striking vocal control and magnificent dynamic range throughout, matched only by a luminescent smile and a fiery persona that comes to life in the third act in her successive numbers with Brummel. Bravo!

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Soprano Cecilia Violetta López as the mysterious priestess, Léïla

The production overall is professionally staged (Richard Harrell) and somewhat modest in scope, with little or no set transitions (Charlie Smith). Since events transpire very quickly, there's no opportunity for any costume changes (Elizabeth Poindexter). But the second act does employ some spectacular sound and lighting design (Pamila Gray), and the final sequence features some strong ensemble dancing and choreography (Lise La Cour). And Opera San Jose veteran Anthony Quartuccio conducts the orchestra with appropriate vigor and finesse.

It's an impressive debut for the company's 29th season which, incidentally, is located at one of the most intimate and audience-friendly venues for opera in the world – San Jose's palatial California Theatre.

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Photo Credit: P. Kirk



GREGORY M. ALONZO

Despite living in the South Bay, Greg's heart remains in his hometown of San Francisco. When he's not spending time attending local theatre, art exhibitions or the cinema, he makes ends meet by practicing law in San Jose. He likes to think of himself not as a "critic" but as an unabashed fan of the performing arts with an opinion that, he hopes, is worth sharing. His reviews can also be read at bayareacritic-at-large.blogspot.com which covers theatre venues throughout the Bay Area.

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Publisher
Clinton Stark

Creative Director
Loni Kao Stark

Contributors:
Gregory M. Alonzo
Mike Carrall
Tom Eden
Eve Giovenco
Al Graichen
Eugene Lee
Jane Lurie
Carl Orthlieb
Janice Nieder
Patricia Reardon
Cy Ashley Webb
Chris Wright

Press:
Monica Turner

Send us PR/info/events:
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