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OPERAVILLE

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Opera San Jose, "La Traviata"



February 11, 2012

Opera San Jose delivered a solid and emotionally resonant Traviata, thanks in large part to its lead couple.

Everything begins, of course, with Violetta. Soprano Jouvanca Jean-Baptiste has the power to fill a stadium but also the wisdom to use her power sparingly. She fills her "Ah fors'è lui" with stretches of tender piano, then climbs a stunning crescendo to the restatement of Alfredo's "Di quell'amor." In the supreme vocal conflict of "Sempre libera" – the big Verdian dramatic lyric sound versus the bel canto coloratura – Jean-Baptiste falls more in the former, but lessens the compromise

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ABOUT ME



MICHAEL J. VAUGHN

Michael J. Vaughn is the author of eleven novels, including the recently released "Operaville," available through amazon.com. He is a regular contributor to Writer's Digest, an opera critic, and drummer for the rock band Exit Wonderland.

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with a careful attention to phrasing.

Tenor Alexander Boyer is making things look easy these days, playing Alfredo with a calm grace and ringing out the bronze timbre of his lyric instrument. He also shows an increased attention to nuance, matching Jean-Baptiste in the quiet a capella sections following "Di quell'amor" and creating a beautiful blend in their duet. His only misstep was a squelched top note at the end of Alfredo's opening sequence in Act 2.

Erik Flatmo's set is impressively flexible, its raked hardwood floor and angled walls accommodating Violetta's salon, Flora's salon (an enormous painting of a bull for the Spanish entertainments), and the couple's country home (a soaring river-rock fireplace). The expansive rear window provides an added feeling of space and views of the Eiffel Tower and Violetta's country garden.

The party scenes are well-played by Andrew Whitfield's chorus; a quartet of dancers (Paola McCormick-Quintero, Maurice Monge, Robert Raney, Analisa Sabo) gives the gypsy/matador divertissements a decided sense of panache. Overall, stage director Jose Maria Condemí takes a restrained approach, which plays well most of the time, but takes the punch out of the opera's most dramatic single action. When the scorned Alfredo gathers Flora's guests to witness his return of monies owed to his former lover, he's supposed to quite literally throw it in her face. Condemí's interpretation is more of a forceful handoff, which takes all the shocking brutality. On the other hand, Condemí creates a stunning central image – one of Violetta's party dresses – to represent both her life and her death.

Though conductor David Rohrbaugh had occasional tempo-battles with his singers, the orchestra played well, especially the propulsive strings passages of Flora's party. Baritone Torlef Borsting did well with Germont's sterner moments, but he didn't quite capture the more compassionate side (Germont is a problematic character, regardless, screwing up everyone's lives at the altar of reputation and then expecting his apologies to be taken seriously). Lastly, I offer a left-handed compliment: it is downright painful to see Silas Elash as Dr. Genvil, knowing that we will only be treated to that velvet bass for a few phrases. But at least we've got the right man to deliver the obligatory descending notes of the death diagnosis.

The ribbon on the wrapping lies in a middle ground between what we call "singing" and what we call "acting." Call it the emotional thread of

the opera. Jean-Baptiste works hard to build the tragic arc of Violetta's demise, beginning with her plaintive capitulation to Germont's demands, "Dite alla giovine," in Act 2; through the pleadings with Alfredo at Flora's party, landing finally at her deathbed in Act 3, tormented with the idea that she may die alone while all Paris celebrates Mardi Gras outside her window. She takes the vocal devices that she has employed throughout the opera and leads us on a torturous journey through "Addio, del passato," filled with bursts of anguish, ravishing diminuendos and sudden pianos. She succeeds in breaking our hearts in that divine way that brings us to the opera time and again.

Through Feb. 26, California Theater, 345 S. First Street, San Jose. \$51-\$101, operasj.org, 408/437-4450.

Image: Jouvanca Jean-Baptiste as Violetta. Photo by P. Kirk.

Michael J. Vaughn is a 25-year opera critic and the author of the novels "Operaville" and "Gabiella's Voice," both available at amazon.com.

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