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THE HEART OF ASIA



eye Performance

Strong finish saves 'La Traviata'

Opera San Jose
production comes
alive in second act

By Richard Scheinin

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Giuseppe Verdi's "La Traviata" is a sentimental masterpiece and then some; the best productions will cut to the core — leave audiences gasping as the curtain falls. Saturday night at the California Theatre, Opera San Jose debuted a "Traviata" (running through Feb. 26) that glided through

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the surface drama for its first half, then mysteriously came fully to life, engaging the tragedy's deepest currents.

So, let's begin with the deathbed scene, the final act. As Violetta Valéry, the Parisian courtesan and society belle who is dying of an undisclosed illness, soprano Jouvanka Jean-Baptiste sang with softest, pure-toned clarity: the radiance of death. Drawing her last breaths, briefly rising to her feet and singing with ethereal splendor, this Violetta collapsed into the arms of Alfredo Germont, her remorse-filled lover — lyric tenor Alexander Boyer, who sang with copious, sweet passion throughout the night and now visibly choked on his grief as the curtain came down.

Riveting death scene

Deathbed scenes don't get much better than this one. As if watching "Traviata" for the first time, this reviewer was choking down sobs. It was quite the opening-night finish for the production — actually a coproduction with Opera Santa Barbara, which staged it last year under the supervision of the same stage director, Jose Maria Condemi. (A second cast, with soprano Rebecca Davis as Violetta and tenor Michael Dailey as Alfredo, rotates with this one.)

However, the deathbed scene and its preliminaries



PAT KIRK/COURTESY OF OPERA SAN JOSE

Torlef Borsting sings Giorgio Germont, and Jouvanka Jean-Baptiste is Violetta in "La Traviata."

OPERA SAN JOSE

Presenting Verdi's "La Traviata" with two rotating casts

Through: Feb. 26

Where: California Theatre,
345 S. First St., San Jose

Tickets: \$51-\$101,
408-437-4450,
www.operasj.org

— also very good here — make for only half a "Traviata." What was wrong with the first half? It was handsome and festive: rousing chorus, sumptuous party scenes, with the image of the Eiffel Tower visible through the windows of Violetta's salon. (Condemi sets the action in 1889, the year the tower was built. The idea is to make stark the contrast between the city's rising Belle Époque exuberance and Violetta's decline.)

But the elegant sets and costumes (by Erik Flatmo and Elizabeth Poindexter, respectively) aren't enough to carry the production. Even with some consistently good singing by other principals — baritone Torlef Borsting was in commanding voice as Giorgio Germont, Alfredo's meddling father — this "Traviata" took

a long time to hit its dramatic mark.

Jean-Baptiste, who is tackling the role of Violetta for the first time, was part of the problem. Naturally, the opera hinges on the role, a taxing one, placing multiple demands on the singer. She must show a strong lyric voice, capable of stirring up deep emotions, while also coloring and inflecting with high-flying ease through intricate coloratura passages.

Reaching Act I's climax with the aria "E strano!" ("It's strange!"), Jean-Baptiste settled into some velvety contours. But as she reached the cadenza, with its declamations about love's fever and foolishness, and then moved into "Sempre libera" ("Always free"), her roulades lacked precision and her voice was stretched thin at the top. The contrast with the soaring tower's image behind her was unfortunate.

But Saturday's shortcomings ran deeper than a single performance. With its unsurpassed melodies and real-life *verismo* appeal, "Traviata" is a familiar favorite. Successful productions must fully exploit the acting skills of its singers

to remind us anew of just how wrenching the tale really is.

The opera's dramatic core is the Act 2 duet between Violetta and Giorgio, the father, who secretly arrives at the courtesan's country home to demand that she break off with Alfredo. She may be the belle of the ball, but she remains a prostitute, he basically tells her, and her association with Alfredo is ruining the family name.

Their negotiations, which end with heartbroken Violetta agreeing to call off the romance, are long ones. And Saturday, they dragged. The singing here by Jean-Baptiste and Borsting was technically secure, yet all the discussion of true love, sacrifice and heavenly rewards didn't amount to much more than words. The father's demands were spoken, but their wrenching impact — for both parties — wasn't felt.

Life from the party

Of course, the chemistry within a cast is a mysterious thing. It's hard to pinpoint exactly what was wrong here. And it's hard to explain why things began to jell soon after, during the second party scene — the one with the Gypsy dancers and the Spanish matadors, the one where Alfredo humiliates Violetta, throwing a thick wad of money at her feet.

During this scene's finale, the dramatic tension suddenly grew acute; you could feel it. It happened during the "Thinks" ensemble piece, a complex number in which the various cast members simultaneously reveal their private thoughts of love, remorse and the like. The orchestra, conducted by David Rohrbaugh, spun the delicate underpinnings to this splendid set piece, and the mood never abated, flowing straight through the ethereal splendor of the deathbed scene.

Well, as they say, half a "Traviata" is better than none.

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