

Opera San Jose: Gounod's Faust

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“Faust” is a rather unwieldy opera, and Opera San Jose’s well-established skill at strategic cuts serves it well, combined with a lively, comically attuned approach by stage director Brad Dalton. The group scenes, especially, are lively and entertaining, owing greatly to the work of the chorus under Andrew Whitfield.

The ringmaster is bass Silas Elash, who has undergone an impressive reduction in girth without losing any weight in that velvet tone. He plays Méphistophélès as a kind of rogue pirate, equal parts creepy and funny, and takes great relish in the Act I golden calf song, “Le veau d’or.”

His partner in crime, tenor Michael Dailey, offers something of a mixed bag. Playing Old Faust in the opening scene, he delivers an impressively rough tone, then shifts to a smoother Young Faust, lending some lovely top notes to the garden duet with Marguerite, “O nuit d’amour.” The disappointment comes in the famed “Salut, demeure chaste et pure.” Much of the piece lies in the middle range, and Dailey’s voice gets lost in the orchestra, particularly when singing from upstage.

Soprano Jouvanca Jean-Baptiste lacks the sense of nuance and phrasing that she showed in “Traviata,” with the exception of the second-act “Il était un roi de Thulé’.” She does an excellent job, however, in embodying Marguerite’s pathos, beginning with a wide-eyed innocence at the discovery of love and ending with an effectively gradual descent into madness once she’s been abandoned.

Baritone Even Brummel gives a solid account as Marguerite’s brother Valentin, especially in his pre-battle aria, “Avant de quitter ces lieux.” Mezzo Betany Coffland’s farewell as a resident artist comes in the minor trouser role of Siebel, Marguerite’s unsuccessful suitor, but she delivers the small aria “Faites-lui mes aveux” with the same care and tonal energy that San Jose audiences have come to expect. (She’s also mastered that essential mezzo skill of walking like a boy.) As Marguerite’s guardian Marthe, soprano Heather Clemens is just plain funny the moment she hits the stage, forgetting her

battle-slain hubby in a matter of seconds in order to pursue the handsome devil who actually is one. Another highlight comes from the returning soldiers, who deliver a rousing chorus, “Deposons les armes.”

Dalton uses his cast to create a number of visually arresting images, notably when Méphistophélès turns the local congregation into automatons, wearing upside-down hymnals as hats to signify their possession. Dalton also deploys a young girl, Jesigga Siguardardottir, to appear as the ghost of Marguerite’s little sister, a touching addition.

Following the recent operatic trend toward conceptual staging, Steven C. Kemp makes use of several painted flats, including an intricately mapped blackboard for Faust’s study and an intriguing quartet of hell-scenes for Marguerite’s prison set. The sparseness allows for some captivating use of light, including the obvious-but-effective floods of red as the devil uses his powers (David Lee Cuthbert, lighting designer).

The church scene allowed for use of the California Theater’s built-in organ, always a bonus. Méphistophélès was accompanied by a quartet of dancing minions, which is as it should be.

Through May 6, California Theater, 345 S. First Street, San Jose. \$51-\$101, 408/437-4450, www.operasj.org.

Opera San Jose’s 2012-13 season offers Bizet’s “The Pearl Fishers” (Sept. 8-23), Strauss’s “Die Fledermaus” (Nov. 10-25), Verdi’s “Il Trovatore” (Feb. 9-24) and Puccini’s “Suor Angelica” and “Gianni Schicchi.”

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