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OPERETTA REVIEW: Opera San Jose polishes Johann Strauss' gem

by Mort Levine

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Fizzy champagne tingles the tongue. Now multiply that by a similar zing to all of the other bodily senses. That's the kind of impact Opera San Jose's first production of Johann Strauss' best operetta, "Die Fledermaus," had on the audience Sunday afternoon at the California Theater. This most popular of all the operettas ever written proved a rousing, zesty tale of flirtations, masked identities and a payback for the embarrassment of a practical joke with an even more elaborate one.

The essential difference between opera and operetta is like the difference between a light wine and a heavier one. This work is actually a complete narrative story coupled with memorable melodies spanning the widest range of moods, dance forms and tempi. It keeps every music lover enthralled.

The title is actually "The Revenge of the Bat" because of the practical joke that involved a bat costume a few years before the operetta begins.

Opera San Jose assembled an outstanding cast of singers and guided them with a talented and imaginative creative team headed by skillful veteran director Marc Jacobs making his OSJ debut. The company's founding music director/conductor David Rohrbaugh kept the often frenzied pace for the orchestra under tight control. Outstanding work by choreographer Robin Tribuzi brought some spectacular ballet to life during the second act ball. Important creative work by set designer Charlie Smith, costumes by Cathleen Edwards and lighting by Pamila Gray all contributed

importantly.

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Heading the cast in the Sunday performance was the dazzling soprano Cecilia Violetta Lopez, in her first year as an Opera San Jose resident artist. Singing Rosalinda with a big, buttery sound, her vocalizing dominated the stage. She effortlessly migrates from an upper class housewife in act one to a tantalizing Hungarian countess in the second act. Her husband, the gullible banker Gabriel Eisenstein, is played by tenor Alexander Boyer, also a resident artist. He is the victim of the joke intricately put together by his good friend and physician Dr. Falke sung by baritone Jo Vincent Parks. His acting and masterfully navigating several complex arias culminated in a mood-changing "Bruderlein und Schwesterlein" ("brotherly and sisterly love").

Important to the plot was the warden (bass baritone Isaiah Musik-Ayala) of the jail that Eisenstein was to serve a short sentence. He added considerably to the

comic turns when imitating a French chevalier at the ball he was lured to keep his spirits up before the jail term.

Host of the gala dinner-dance was a bored Russian nobleman, Prince Orlovsky, sung as a pants role by the svelte mezzo soprano Rebecca Krouner. Her two signature arias framed the fun of the second act, her opener was "Ich lade gern mir Gaste ein" ("I like inviting people to a party") which winds up suggesting "Chacun a son gout" ("each to his own taste"). The second was a toast to king champagne as a huge egg was wheeled on to the revealing when open a dancer with a bottle in each hand. The aria is "Im Feuerstrom der Reben" ("In the grape's fiery stream a heavenly substance is sparkling").

Another remarkable performance is produced by the insouciant comic soprano Elizabeth Russ, the household's chambermaid turned into a stage actress at the ball. Her aria where she denies to the guests that she resembles his chambermaid "Mein Herr Marquis" ("Now, see here, sir") is a comic tour de force.

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Sweet-voiced tenor Michael Dailey, a resident artist, convincingly plays an over the top Italian opera singer trying to make time with Rosalinda while Eisenstein is in jail, but then gets mistakenly put behind bars when mistaken for the man of the house. Dailey sings and acts with a great command.

A non-singing role, Frosch the jailer was played by Kelly Houston with an upright comic dignity. It is usually played for broader farce with Fosch taking frequent nips from a flask.

The remarkable set in act one was a handsome high-ceilinged solarium in an ornate Viennese art nouveau style of the early 20th century. It turned in the gala ballroom for act two and wound up in the third with the dropping of a screen of jailhouse bars as "a big beautiful bird cage." It is that phrase which the warden used to describe his amiable prison ("Mein schones grosses Vogelhaus").

The songs were all sung in German but dialogue that outlined the complicated plot lines were in English, as were the supertitles for the tunes.

This cast will sing future performances on Nov. 17, 20 and 25. A different cast sings Nov. 18 and 23 at 3 p.m. All other shows have an 8 p.m. curtain. Tickets are still available.

Audiences will love this production as much as the cast had fun doing it. Maybe that's because this marvelous work of the musical genius known as the "Waltz King" (great polkas and czardas' also) just doesn't want to take itself very seriously.

Mort Levine is co-founder and publisher emeritus of Milpitas Post Newspapers.

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