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Review: Opera San Jose unveils its sparkling and very funny new production of 'Die Fledermaus'

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There's a moment during Opera San Jose's sparkling new production of "Die Fledermaus" when this musical farce goes brilliantly, nuttily, over the top. It's at the end of the second act, when all the principals on stage -- friends and lovers, strivers and cheaters -- are tipsy with champagne. They're waltzing about, falling into one another's arms, forgetting their rivalries -- and suddenly form a conga line, circling the ballroom. It's madness in old Vienna.

This can't be what Johann Strauss II, the "Waltz King," intended. But his operetta -- or opera or musical comedy or whatever you choose to call it -- has proven endlessly update-able for 140 years. It's a work that's pliable and magical, about infidelities that give way to felicity and fraternity -- and Opera San Jose has captured the magic in this production, which opened Saturday at the California Theatre. It's as if the company is playing Tinker Bell, sprinkling all of us with fairy dust.

Director Marc Jacobs -- respected veteran of Bay Area stages, making his company debut here -- gets a lot of the credit for this adorable and well-paced production. It's not perfect. "Die Fledermaus" -- it means "The Bat" -- includes lots of spoken dialogue, which is sometimes a problem here, as the company's singers are not practiced actors. Especially in the first act, there's some amateurishness, as in V-E-R-Y over-enunciated diction. (The dialogue is entirely in English here, while the singing is in the original German.)

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Pat Kirk/Opera San Jose Mezzo-soprano Nicole Birkland as Count... (Pat Kirk/Opera San Jose)

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But way more than the sum of its parts, this "Bat" flies on the spirit of the ensemble. Its collective buy-in is obvious: Everyone loves the story and the

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tunes, which are infectious and sentimental, and at least one of which (the great "Fledermaus Waltz") is genetically fixed in much of the world's musical DNA. Ably conducted by David Rohrbaugh, the orchestra zips along, as the singers keep peeling off into duets, trios, clever ensemble "think" pieces and choral numbers that dazzle with exuberance. Keeping it loose, Jacobs allows for contemporary references to disco hits and bankers who take a mile when given an inch.

Time for champagne

And the production is gorgeous.

Charlie Smith's sets evoke the palatial apartments and ballrooms of the Viennese idle rich. Pamila Gray's lighting deepens the sumptuousness, as do the elegant gowns and other costumes by Cathleen Edwards. It's a visual feast: Robyn Tribuzi's choreography is a whirl of delight, drawing in the principals and full chorus. Everyone looks happy, moving comfortably. And when a shimmying dancer emerges from a giant faux Faberge egg; hey, it's time to pop those champagne bottles.

Overall, the singing isn't great, but much of it is very good. The quintessential performance in this production -- which owes equal debts to the Marx Brothers and Carol Burnett's old television show -- is given by soprano Jillian Boye, as Adele, the chambermaid who is dying to be an actress and socialite. Imagine Burnett as an operatic soprano. That's Boye, displaying a broad penetrating voice with a giddy updraft into her high register. She's passionate, zany -- a natural comic.

So is tenor Michael Dailey, as the suave and ridiculous Alfred, a Verdi specialist who won't stop serenading his lover, Rosalinde --- who is married to another of the protagonists, the businessman Gabriel von Eisenstein. Dailey's voice is lilting and well-balanced, as light as a good pinot noir. Also singing with mellifluous command is resident baritone Zachary Altman as Dr. Falke, the elegantly obsequious and manipulative fellow who sets the story in motion.

Great voices

Basically, the tale goes like this.

Having been victimized by a prank years earlier ("The Bat" refers to the insult) Falke seeks revenge. He invites the prankster -- his friend Eisenstein -- to a lavish party at the home of Prince Orlofsky, a Russian millionaire, knowing that Eisenstein won't be able to keep his paws off the beautiful women among the guests. As the plot develops, Eisenstein (a banker facing a jail term, by the way) is caught in the act: with Adele (who presents herself as an actress named Olga) and then with Rosalinde (disguised as a Hungarian countess, she sees his philandering up close.)

As flirtatious Rosalinde, new resident soprano Melody King showed off her attractive and broad-beamed voice, though she occasionally slipped out of focus in her upper register. As Eisenstein, tenor James Callon (another new resident), started stiffly but grew into an easy comic lyricism by the final act. In her company debut, resident mezzo-soprano Nicole Birkland was hilarious as Orlofsky: anchoring the party scenes with her meaty singing, and speaking with the most absurd Russian accent.

As with all Opera San Jose productions, this one has two rotating casts. I've seen only the first, which also included bass-baritone Isaiah Musik-Ayala, in superb voice and very funny as Frank, the drunken jail warden. Mezzo-soprano Tori Grayum was coquettishly hammy and lusty-voiced as Ida, sister of Adele. Tenor Michael Mendelsohn, as Dr. Blind, the lawyer, showed him to be what he is: a fuddy-duddy. And Kelly Houston, in the non-singing role of Frosch, the comical jail guard, practically stole his scenes. He's got charisma.

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"Die Fledermaus" ("The Bat"), by Johann Strauss II



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Kevin McGiboney

My wife and I had a SPLENDID time! Still tipsy from the intoxicating music. Kudos to the singers, particularly Ms. Boye and Mr. Musik-Ayala. If you love music, theater, and comedy - GO!

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