

REVIEW : Voce di meche

We are here to encourage the development of gifted young singers and to stimulate the growth of New York City's invaluable chamber opera companies. But we will not neglect the Metropolitan Opera either. Get ready for bouquets and brickbats.

Saturday, October 12, 2013

TRAGEDY TONIGHT! COMEDY TONIGHT!



Chad Kranak, Samantha Britt, Robert Balonek, Darcy Dunn (photo by Sheryl Liu)

If you shed a tear or two during Richard Wargo's *Ballymore-Part One: Winners*, not to worry because Seymour Barab's *La Pizza Con Funghi* will send you out with a grin from ear to ear. Chelsea Opera Co-Founders Leonarda Priore and Lynne Hayden-Findlay wisely chose to balance tragedy with comedy much as Puccini did when he followed *Il Tabarro* with *Gianni Schicchi*. Irish dramatist Brian Friel penned *Lovers* as a two-part play comprising *Winners* and *Losers*. That he chose to see the 17-year old couple Mag and Joe, fated to die in a boating accident on the same day as the play takes place, as winners is an interesting concept. Perhaps they are winners because they died with their hopes for the future intact before life came along and whipped 'em upside the head. We saw the play exactly one year ago (The Actors Company Theater) and recall that *Losers* was about a middle-aged couple trying to have some intimacy under the watchful eyes of the woman's bedridden mother who did everything to prevent it. That was indeed humorous and we understand that Mr. Wargo similarly adapted Part II which we would be happy to see/hear in view of how greatly we enjoyed Part I.

The work was introduced by some lovely lilting music, played by Jerry O'Sullivan on the Uilleann Pipes, which went a long way toward setting the mood. Scenes of the pregnant Mag (not just pregnant but 1960's Ireland pregnant) and her fiancé Joe are commented upon by two Ballad-Singers, beautifully costumed in ancient attire, looking very much like Isolde and King Marke. Costume Design was credited to Ms. Hayden-Findlay herself. In the play, they were merely narrators so this was quite a lovely touch. They described how the two young people arrived at the hilltop overlooking the town of Ballymore and what happened to them afterward, a rather dry and factual commentary offsetting the intensity of the interaction between Mag and Joe as they planned their wedding and life together. One senses that all is not rosy since Joe will have to give up his goal of a university degree to assume responsibility for a family. Mag is so exuberant that he is unable to study for his maths exam, which had been the goal for the day.

The role of Mag was sung by the bright-voiced soprano Samantha Britt who did a great job of convincing us that she was but 17. Her opening aria looking down at her hometown was splendid. Tenor Chad Kranak portrayed Joe, appearing somewhat older than the part called for; he sings her a lovely lullabye as she sleeps. We would have appreciated titles since there were times when Ms. Britt's voice was overridden by the 14-piece Chelsea Opera Chamber Orchestra, conducted by Guest Conductor Steven M. Crawford, or when the diction was insufficiently clear. The Ballad-Singers were mezzo Darcy Dunn and Robert Balonek, both in fine voice.

The music was far more accessible than that of most contemporary operas and the arias quite beautiful. We always ask ourselves whether the music has added anything to the play and in this case the answer is a resounding yes, although some of the recitatives might as well have been spoken for better comprehension. Friel's writing is rather musical on its own and Mr. Wargo's writing emphasized it. Special note was taken of Stephanie Barbirak's harp and Kevin Willois' flute.

How amazing it was to witness the same four artists in radically different roles in the second half of the program. Seymour Barab, in writing both music and lyrics, created an hilarious sendup of *opera seria* that had the audience rolling in the aisles from the very first moment when Guest Conductor Samuel McCoy assumed the podium in high camp style. If he were mimicking someone particular, do not ask us to reveal the name! The work was adapted from Michael Green's play *Il Fornicazione* (seriously) and takes place in the 18th c. with the most outrageously elaborate wigs and quite gorgeous costumes. An adulterous wife named Voluptua (the versatile Ms. Britt, this time perfectly audible) confides in her maid Phobia (the very funny Ms. Dunn) that she is bored with her husband of six weeks, Count Formaggio (Robert Balonek) and has taken a lover Scorpio (Chad Kranak, this time looking perfect for the role) who suffers from chronic tardiness. Every trope of *opera seria* is burlesqued and references to *Falstaff*, *Il Trovatore* and *Nozze di Figaro* (among others) are slipped in. We will not spoil the fun any further because you will have an opportunity to catch the final performance today at 4PM at St. Peter's Church in Chelsea.

What makes this comic opera work so well is Mr. Barab's facility with fitting words and music together, much like Gilbert and Sullivan combined into one person. The rhymes are inventive and hilarious and the music emphasizes each one. We would gladly see this again!

The minimal set design by Sheryl Liu worked well and the outrageous wigs and makeup by Andrea Calabrese were a further source of hilarity. Sure-fire direction was by Ms. Hayden-Findlay who never missed a trick.

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