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Review: Opera San Jose's 'Falstaff' -- comic romp

By Richard Scheinin
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POSTED: 09/13/2013 11:01:44 AM PDT | UPDATED: 17 MIN. AGO

Giuseppe Verdi's "Falstaff" was the composer's final opera, premiered at La Scala just before his 80th birthday. It's a fantasy and a romp, fast-paced and winking, but with dark undertones. Adapting Shakespeare's "The Merry Wives of Windsor," it pokes at, skewers and generally humiliates big-bellied John Falstaff, that "bold and skilled knight," as he calls himself, who really is a rascal, a lout, a fool, a cad -- a jerk. Nobody can stand him, and he gets his due.

Into this role steps baritone Scott Bearden, that fine singing actor who was a member of Opera San Jose's resident ensemble just over a decade ago. It's been five years since he was last back for a visit -- too long. In the company's new production of "Falstaff" at the California Theatre, Bearden holds forth, a strapping comic presence and mighty singer. His voice is richly burnished and powerfully declamatory, but he also finds the lyric thread that runs through Verdi's score. Bearden even breaks into falsettos -- and drops into a split in the middle of a serenade.

As this master of self-regard -- "My lusty flanks, my broad chest," Falstaff (an Italian) --

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California stage two more times before "Falstaff" closes Sept. 22. A second cast, with baritone Steven Cody in the title role, will have three more performances.)

It's a handsome production, directed by Jose Maria Condemi, whose brisk, deft pacing was matched at Thursday's performance by conductor Andrew Whitfield, leading the orchestra through the breakneck score. Octogenarian Verdi had fun with his orchestration, which rarely lets up -- and, when it does, lavishes the audience with complex and ingenious gossamer textures. Thursday, the winds were especially effective at relaying those effects.

Basically, this is the story: Falstaff -- thumbing his belly, thinking himself sexy -- decides to hit on two rich married women, Alice Ford and Meg Page. He mails them letters, suggesting they have a little fun with Sir John. Outraged, they ask their friend Dame Quickly to help engineer this absurd fellow's humiliation. This involves making him think they really do desire his lusty flanks -- which makes Mr. Ford, Alice's husband, jealous. And so on.

Among the other cast members, resident mezzo-soprano Nicole Birkland (as Dame Quickly) was best able to go toe-to-toe with Bearden's unwavering power. Especially in its lower reaches, her voice was imposing -- sound the alarms! Making her debut as a resident singer, soprano Jennifer Forni (as Alice) sang with silvery tones that became increasingly impressive

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through the night, while mezzo-soprano Lisa Chavez (as Meg, and also debuting as a resident artist) hinted at a buttery sound with an appealing bite.

This was the best performance I've yet seen from soprano Cecilia Violetta López, who is in her second season with the company. As Alice's daughter Nannetta, she was in fine voice -- consistently plush and shimmering with color; really terrific. As Fenton, Nannetta's young lover, resident tenor James Callon was ardent and mellow-toned, but lacking in projection. Similarly, resident baritone Zachary Altman (as Ford, the jealous husband) sang with elegance and conviction, yet a muffled quality kept creeping into his voice. No such problems for bass Silas Elash (as Pistola, one of Falstaff's goofball assistants), whose voice is like a custom-designed cannon. Meaty-voiced tenor Robert Norman sang the role of Dr. Caius, loser in love.

"Falstaff" is a carnival of duets, quartets, nonets and more. Some of the rapid-patter ensemble numbers were a little rag-tag, while others sparkled, especially among the women.

Hats off to the costume shop at Malabar Limited Toronto (the fairy scene get-ups were especially gorgeous) and to designer Steven C. Kemp, whose big, bold and handsome sets bring to mind the interior of a wine keg -- and the state of drink-loving Falstaff's mind.

Contact Richard Scheinin at 408-920-5069, read his stories and reviews at www.mercurynews.com/richard-scheinin and follow him on Twitter at www.twitter.com/richardscheinin

Opera San Jose

Presenting 'Falstaff' by Guiseppe Verdi, libretto by Arrigo Boito, with two casts
When: 8 p.m. Sept. 14, 3 p.m. Sept. 15, 8 p.m. Sept. 17 and 20, 3 p.m. Sept. 22
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