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Review: Opera San Jose premieres lyric 'Angels'

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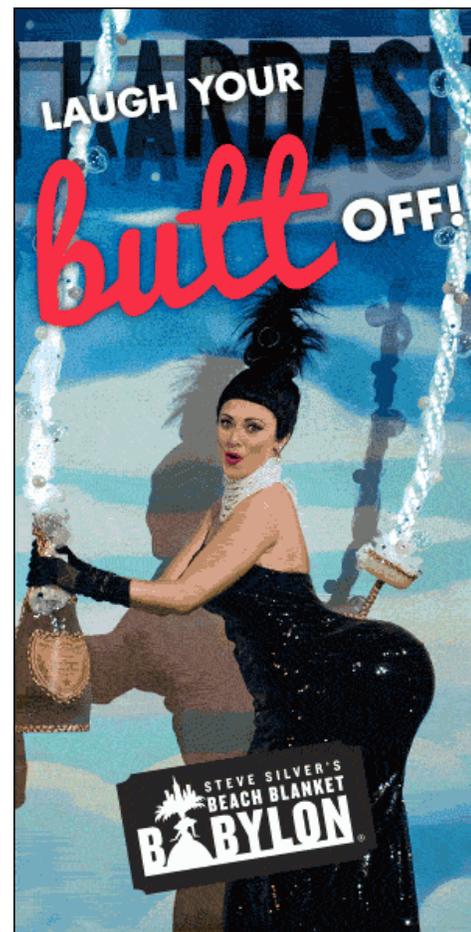
UPDATED: ABOUT 21 HOURS AGO

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SAN JOSE -- "Where Angels Fear to Tread" is a comedy that ends in tragedy. It's about cultural misunderstandings: The button-down English collide with the openhearted Italians, and neither quite gets what the other is up to. In moments of confusion, one turns to tea, the other to Chianti. Laughs ensue, but the comedy has consequences that are painful.

Based on the meaty little novel by E.M. Forster, this new opera, a world premiere from Opera San Jose, opened Saturday at the California Theatre. Directed by Lillian Groag, it is an ambitious and often charming production, and, most importantly, it has a potent score. In the last act, as hearts are cracked open, composer Mark Lanz Weiser opens the floodgates. His music arrives in waves.

A deft orchestral colorist and word painter (his teammate here is librettist Roger Brunyate), composer Weiser has created several ravishing ensemble numbers along the way, as well as a sparkling interlude of night music and an Old English lullaby that spells peace. A number of his elegant arias feel architectural, as if inspired by the classic Italian setting with its ancient towers and fortress -- the "Rocca," which gives its name to a memorable quartet in



the opening act.

The story begins with Lilia Herriton, a rich English widow who moves to the fictitious Italian town of Monteriano, where she becomes engaged to a handsome local named Gino Carella. He is 10 years her junior, poor and something of a boor. He is also handsome, honest and mostly likable.

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The English fools who rush in to block the engagement are Philip Herriton (Lilia's weak but good-hearted brother-in-law), Harriet Herriton (Philip's insufferable sister) and their young friend Caroline Abbott (the catalyst for just about all the change that occurs here). The plot thickens: Lilia and Gino marry and have a child. Lilia dies in childbirth. The three English fools lay plans to take the baby back to England --

with tragically bungled results, which Weiser underscores with allusions to Stravinsky's "The Rite of Spring," music about a sacrifice.

There were dramatic flat spots during Saturday's debut, alas. Conducted by Joseph Marcheso, the orchestra and cast were still feeling their way toward that point of comfort where a performance just glides. Perhaps they will find it during the remainder of the run, though Brunyate's libretto poses a few hurdles. Here and there, he hews too faithfully to Forster's storyline: Overstuffed with plot, the nearly three-hour production could use a thinning out.

That said, Brunyate has unpacked Forster's English reserve, allowing the book's underlying emotions to radiate through the text and out into the music. He allows the tale to become an opera.

And, oh yes, the cast.

There are four strong leads. As Gino, Matthew Hanscom showed off his robust baritone and acting know-how: This Gino is at once arrogant, savvy, naive, violent and, above all, tender. As Harriet, mezzo-soprano Lisa Chavez was magnetic, with her plush storm of a voice and her to-the-T depiction of the sister, whose unremitting snobbishness makes her comical. With each of the company's productions, Chavez reveals new aspects of her talents.

The final act puts much focus on Caroline (soprano Christie Conover) and Philip (tenor Kirk Dougherty). Their scenes were superb, with penetrating moments of self-recognition, honest friendship, love and disappointment -- a man and a woman (some say they are two aspects of Forster himself) in the midst of humbling change. Conover's voice was consistently pure, focused and subtly emotional. Dougherty sang with lusty, boyish charm.

Other cast members include soprano Isabella Ivy, plush-voiced, as Lilia; Chloe Smart, a

clear and nimble soprano, as the Padrona, the innkeeper; mezzo-soprano Buffy Baggott, a radiant presence, as Perfetta, Gino's governess; and soprano Jennie Litser, an effective comedian, though somewhat shrill-voiced here, as the Opera Singer. Silas Elash, the company's bedrock bass, is the Cabman; and meaty tenor Michael Boley sings the role of the Sacristan. There is even a barking dog that joins in the sextet finale to the opening act: her name is Frances (Franny) Baggott.

There are numerous heroes in the pit, too, including flutist Isabelle Chapuis and oboist Patricia Emerson Mitchell, who beautifully executed the solos composed by Weiser for those instruments.

Elizabeth Poindexter's costumes pinpoint the opera's period charm (Forster's book dates to 1905), and Michael Ganio's flexible sets allow the action to flow from one locale in Monteriano to the next. It's a simple but attractive production, though it has one woefully low-tech episode: the tragically bungled accident scene, alluded to above.

But that's a quibble.

The first of Opera San Jose's productions since the death in December of company founder Irene Dalis, "Where Angels Fear to Tread" speaks to her vision as well as to that of her successor, general director Larry Hancock.

It also speaks to the imagination and persistence of Weiser and Brunyate, who unveiled the opera in a 1999 student production at the Peabody Conservatory in Baltimore. They have waited a long time for a professional production, and congratulations are in order. At a time when much contemporary opera feels dry and derivative, this one has a voice.

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Opera San Jose

Presenting "Where Angels Fear to Tread" Composed by Mark Lanz Weiser, with libretto by Roger Brunyate, based on the E.M. Forster novel

Through: Feb. 22

Where: California Theatre, San Jose

Tickets: \$51-\$111; 408-437-4450, www.operasj.org (for students 25 and younger with ID, \$11, cash only at box office)

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