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Opera San Jose Presents – Suor Angelica & Gianni Schicchi

BY BET MESSMER – APRIL 17, 2013

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Opera San Jose pairs two remarkably, even wonderfully, dissimilar one act operas in *Suor Angelica* (Sister Angelica) and *Gianni Schicchi* (pronounced “Johnny Ski Key”) in it’s current production running through April 28, 2013 at the California Theatre on First Street in San Jose, Ca. They are two of Puccini’s threesome (il trittico) of one act operas which had their world premier at the Met in 1918.

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Suor Angelica tells the tragic story of Angelica who was forced by her family to give up her “born out of wedlock” baby and “take the veil”. All of the opera takes place in the convent garden. Now a nun, for 7 years she has grieved the loss of her son and family ties.

There’s a hubbub outside – someone important has arrived at the convent. This someone is the Princess, Angelica’s aunt, who has control over the estate of Angelica and her younger sister. This beast of a woman, this juggernaut of non-compassion orders Angelica to sign documents which transfer her portion of her estate to her sister, now that her sibling is marrying. And “Oh, by the way, your son died of a fever 2 years ago”. Angelica, devastated, relinquishes her estate and is overcome with grief that she was not able to comfort her child in his illness.

But there is hope, perhaps. Her role in the convent is to compound medicines. She decides to create a potion that will unite her with her son.. After she has consumed the toxic herbs, she suddenly realizes that in taking her own life, she has committed a sin that will send her to hell. Her despair is interrupted by a mystical beam of light falling on the statue of the Virgin Mary in the convent garden’s water fountain. Her young son appears before her in a celestial vision. Is she in a state of religious ecstasy? Is this a hallucination? Or is this a sign of forgiveness, that her prayers will be answered, that her expiation has been accepted?

Cecilia Violetta Lopez’ portrayal of Angelica is heart-rending, pure and hopeful. Lopez, remarkably, sings both the roles of Angelica and Laretta Schicchi with both casts although (the Company typically alternates the taxing roles between a Cast 1 and an A Cast). Patrice Houston totally “owns” the role of the Princess.



Gianni Schicchi [johnny ski key] comes to the stage after Intermission. What a delight! Using the excellent bones of the *Suor Angelica* set, the stage has been effectively converted from a pure serene white into the lush bedchamber of Florentine big wig Buoso Donati who is dead but still warm. His bed is surrounded by “mourning” relatives. This sounds grim, but not so! Perhaps because *Suor Angelica* had been so moving, so spiritual it was a great relief to laugh, and we did, throughout *Gianni Schicchi*. The story:

The patriarch of a wealthy and influential family in Florence has just died, surrounded by an assortment of relatives who hope to inherit his wealth, especially three prime properties: the “finest mule in Tuscany”, his very fine home and his mill in Signa.

Their greed and self-serving is abundantly apparent as the family wrestle, first as a unit, to overcome the reputed wish of the late Buoso – which is to give it all to the local Friars. We are treated to a wild scene of their tearing his bedchamber apart in an attempt to find a will. If they find it, if the notary has not already filed it, they can alter it! A nephew, Rinuccio finds it but refuses to surrender it until he gets a promise from the others that he will be able to marry his sweetheart, Lauretta Schicchi, a local and lovely peasant maiden who unlike the Donatis, has no exalted status and, worse, no dowry. His Aunt Zita, played delightfully and egregiously by Patrice Houston, , agrees, “if we all get our inheritances” you can marry whoever you want. The family reads the will aloud and despairs of collecting what they’d hoped to. Rinuccio, meanwhile, discreetly sends for Lauretta’s father, Gianni Schicchi. Although his relatives object, Rinuccio reassures them. Gianni is clever and knows the laws about wills and such, so who better? However Gianni, who has no love for the Donatis and is adamant that his daughter, Lauretta not marry one, refuses to help. Until Lauretta changes his mind, singing “Oh! mio babbino caro”

Moved, Gianni reads over the will and tells them to call for the notary and two witnesses – The dead Buoso is going to dictate a new will! First Gianni wins the relatives’ confidence by asking each what their fair share of the inheritance should be. We see a quick change of transformation from “unified family” to individual greed. One by one, on the sly, each also puts in a bid for the three prize items (the mule, the house and the mill), promising rich bribes to Gianni. Gianni reminds them that the law is that anyone falsifying information related to a will is subject to

having his right hand chopped off and exile, so, of course, they must all be in this together or all will lose a hand.

Now the fun begins – first Buoso's doctor comes by for his daily visit. Oops, a dead man can't re-write a will so the family assures the doctor that Buoso is feeling better but is resting and doesn't want to be disturbed. Gianni, who had hidden himself in Buoso's bed, imitates Buoso's shaky voice, the doctor is fooled and lets himself be maneuvered out the door. The relatives manage to remove the candles and other indicators of death just in time as the notary arrives. Bundled up in Buoso's bedclothes and with his best imitation of Buoso's voice, Gianni dictates a family-friendly will to the notary, to the family's great glee. Until he gets to the prize properties – which "Buoso" leaves to Gianni! The relatives are furious, but if any were to expose Gianni, they would also implicate themselves and all involved would lose a hand. Rinuccio is the only family member who is happy – now his beloved Lauretta Schicchi will have a dowry and they can marry.

At the final curtain the audience was up on their feet for another standing ovation. The title role was played with conviction and gusto by Zachary Altman. Cecilia Violetta Lopez, still full of energy, sang Lauretta to Alexander Boyer's Rinuccio, Patrice Houston stood out again as Zita.

The costumes and settings were outstanding, as were the supporting casts. (I've discovered that I really like one act operas. These were each roughly an hour in length. And the change of pace is refreshing).

For more information on Opera San Jose, please visit www.operasj.org



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