

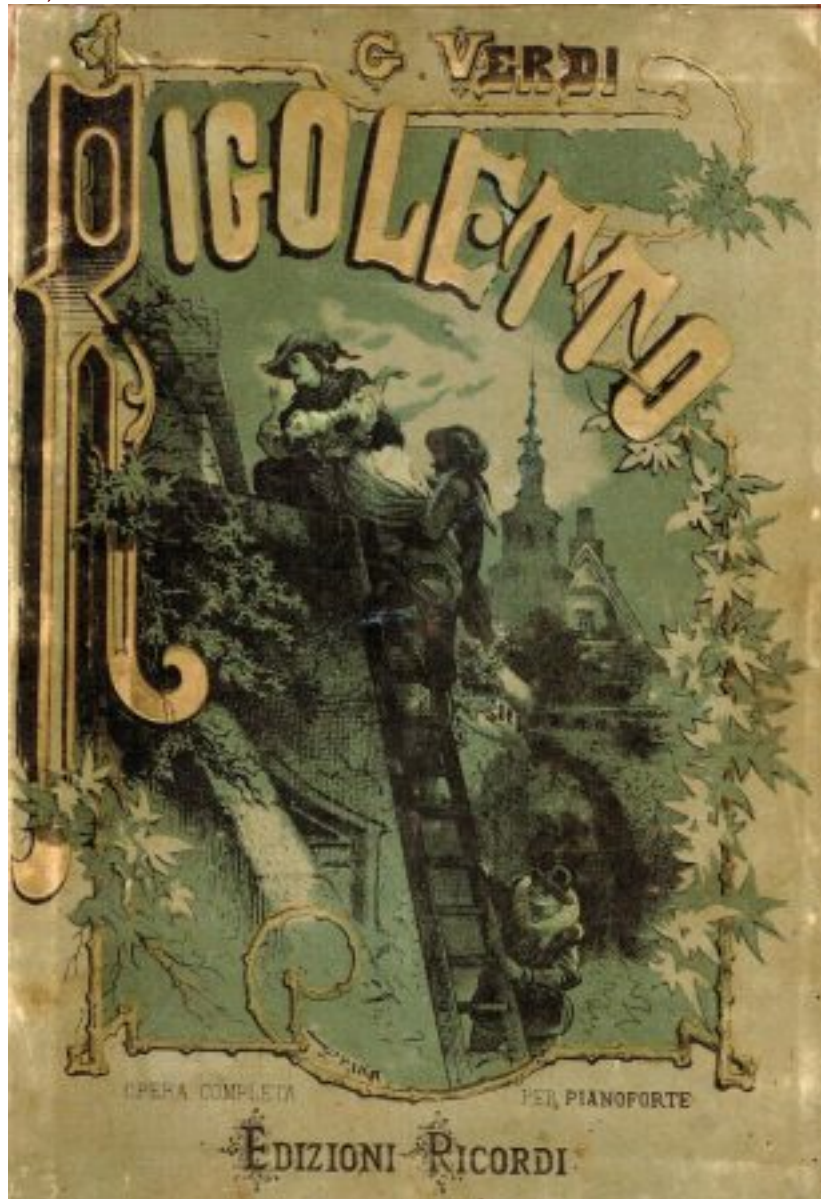
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Rigoletto in San Jose

by [Heather J. Morris](#)

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"Such an exhibition of opera as no respectable member of the fair sex could patronize without then and there sacrificing both taste and modesty." Well, luckily for us tastes have changed since two New Yorkers sought to prevent this 'lewd and licentious work' from being performed in their city in 1855. *Rigoletto* is a true blood and thunder opera, driven not only by the thrilling plot, but also by the ultimate heartbreak of the title character in his quest for

vengeance. Opera San Jose's September 14 production highlighted the drama in the music from the opening menacing chords to anguish of the final scene.

Founded in 1984 this is the only full-year resident opera company in the United States and their new home at the historic California Theater in downtown San Jose is a splendid place to see grand opera: there's even a resident organist in the foyer to cap off the experience.

Yes, 'Rigoletto' is melodrama at its most Shakespearian but what makes this opera so riveting is the terrific personalities that are drawn and come to life in it. Baritone Matthew Hanscom's Rigoletto was superb. He took us along on his emotional roller coaster ride with a wonderful versatile voice, full of expressive personality and technical prowess. His daughter Gilda's role demands a light silvery voice and Isabella Ivy sang with grace and agility, making high notes appear effortless even when lying on her back in the *Caro nome* aria. Such is the nature of love! The part of comely wench who is cahoots with her brother, the assassin, was sung by Lisa Chavez whose strong characterization went hand in hand with her rich mezzo soprano voice. As Sparafucile Silas Elash was a highly believable baddie, with a rich voice deep enough to plumb the depths of his depravity. A little less believable in his role was Kirk Dougherty as the Duke of Mantua. I just didn't find his characterization obnoxious enough though his vocal exploits were tip top.

Taking red as the predominant color, a color that speaks of danger, strength and determination as well as passion, desire and love, Steven Kemp's set was traditional, taking us to 16th century Mantua where the courtiers lived a life of luxury and excess, bedecked in flowing robes and jewels designed in this production by Alyssa Oania. In contrast Rigoletto's daughter, Gilda is outfitted in a pure virginal blue and white shift speaking of naivete. When playing the role of jester in the duke's court Rigoletto wears a bright jester's suit complete with pompoms and carrying a bauble, his mock scepter. His makeup was akin to that of the Joker in the Batman movies, emphasizing the demonic rather than the funny side of his clownish character. The scene when he removes his makeup revealing his true self is pivotal in the emotional connection the character builds with the audience, because it's only when we're on Rigoletto's side does the pathos and tragedy of the story impact us. We see him from now on not as a taunting buffoon but as a widowed father, eager to protect his daughter from the excesses of the life at court.

The tragedy, is that by seeking vengeance he brings about her death. There are no vocal fireworks for exhibitionistic reasons in this work. Gone are the series of set arias associated with the *bel canto* style of opera of the previous century. In 'Rigoletto' Verdi opened up and expanded the formula bel canto opera by employing a larger orchestra. This demanded a louder voice, and the tenor's highest range is sung with full force rather than the delicate head tones of the former style. Vocal display is now used to heighten emotional intensity. There were a few occasions on Sunday afternoon when the orchestra's exuberance overwhelmed the vocal lines as in the quartet in Act 3 but the balance under the baton of the new music director Joseph Marcheso in general was good, not an easy thing to accomplish with the large orchestra this work calls for.

Verdi wrote, "In the theater the public will stand for anything but boredom." On Sunday afternoon I doubt the word 'boredom' was on anyone's lips. Victor Hugo's play, 'Le Roi s'amuse' on which 'Rigoletto' is based closed after one performance. You are fortunate to be able to see Opera San Jose's production for one more weekend.

End

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