

Opera review: Macabre tale where innocence is lost, vengeance goes awry

By Mort Levine

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Resident tenor Kirk Dougherty as the Duke of Mantua and resident soprano... (Photo by Pat Kirk 2

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Last weekend's opening performances of Verdi's ever-popular "Rigoletto" brought standing ovations for the new production created by the team put together by newly named General Director Larry Hancock and music director/conductor Joseph Macheso. The gripping human tragedy is replete with some of the greatest sing-able music in all opera. It goes forth on the stage of the California Theatre in downtown San Jose. You have three more chances to experience it the next two Sundays (Sept. 14 and 21 at 3 p.m.) and next Friday (Sept. 19 at 8 p.m.).

Opera San Jose's resident artists took principal roles and came through with great voices and splendid acting. The title role is sung by baritone Matthew Hanscom with former resident Evan Brummel taking over last Sunday and next Friday. Rigoletto's ill-fated daughter is played in her Opera San Jose debut by soprano Isabella Ivy with the licentious Duke of Mantua performed by tenor Kirk Dougherty in his first appearance with the company.

In past years, all of the operas were double cast to allow multiple Saturday night and Sunday matinees. The decision to space performances, with the exception of the opening weekend, allows a single cast to sing all but the lead role.

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Rigoletto is Verdi's setting of a notorious play by Victor Hugo which was quickly shut down by censors in liberal Paris, with its nasty portrayal of a nobleman. Somehow Verdi managed to tailor the opera enough to pass Venetian censors. It proved a sensation. The lead character is a deformed court jester who mocks an aggrieved father whose daughter was debauched by the despicable duke. Rigoletto is cursed by the father but in turn his own virginal daughter is kidnapped by the courtiers and delivered to the duke. Incensed, Rigoletto hires an assassin to kill the duke and who promises to deliver the body in a sack at a tavern. When Rigoletto goes to collect the sack with the body he hears the duke singing the immoral, anti-feminist aria "La Donna e' mobile". Outraged, he opens the sack and discovers his own daughter drawing her final breaths. She interposed herself to save the duke who had seduced her. The curse ("Maledizione") has come true for the tearful father.

In the Sunday performance we viewed, Brummal's portrayal ranged from his callous mockery of other to becoming a pitiable figure at the end. Both in voice and in acting, he was superb.

Miss Ivy's buttery coloratura runs and youthful soulfulness combined for a believable Gilda. Although his high notes were a bit pinched, Mr. Dougherty carried his many melodic moments with appropriate swagger as the duke. A highlight of the opera is the famous quartet opening the third act in which the duke, his paramour for the night, Maddalena, sister of the assassin, Rigoletto and Gilda all combine melodically and magically with each revealing individual concerns.

Essential to the opera is the excellent Opera San Jose chorus with their significant role in the first two acts. Other important cast members were Sparafucile, sung by veteran former resident artist Silas Elash. He also sang the father who uttered the curse, Monterone. Lisa Chavez gave forth some dulcet mezzo tones as the sultry Maddalena.

Stage direction is by Brad Dalton, who returns to the company having done many memorable productions here. He cleverly brought out the many textures and emotional confrontations in the opera. The set design by Kent Dorsey had a few surrealistic touches such as a stairway that led nowhere and a fountain courtyard surrounded by walls solidly covered with paper roses of red and white.

The opera is sung in Italian with supertitles above the proscenium. That enables the audience to get a few chuckles that would be lost if the titles were absent. Example: when the assassin's sister tells him he can collect the money just as easily by killing

Rigoletto. Sparafucile takes umbrage saying, "What the devil are you saying. Am I a robber? Am I a bandit? The man has paid me, I keep my word."

Listening closely to this opera will reveal a musical genius now in mid-career to compose his best works. Francisco Piave wrote the libretto but it was Verdi who knew exactly how to drive the dramatic suspense and emotional charge through adept musical scoring. It makes for a most memorable musical theater experience.

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