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Review: Opera San Jose's powerful season-opening 'Rigoletto'

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COMMENTS

SAN JOSE -- If you're a fan of Italian opera, you will remember the final scene of Giuseppe Verdi's "Rigoletto." Specifically, you will recall the moment when Gilda, an innocent and foolishly love-struck young woman, knocks at the door of an inn in the middle of a frightening thunderstorm. You've seen it before, you'll see it again, and each time you want to shout out: "Don't go in!"

Of course, she enters, and it's curtains.

The assassin awaits.

That final scene is breaking hearts once again in the powerful production of "Rigoletto" with which Opera San Jose has opened its 31st season. I attended Sunday's performance at the California Theatre -- the second of six performances, through Sept. 21 -- and was struck by how this opera never fails to fascinate and disturb. Its ruminations on love, power and vengeance, and especially on the ruinous complexity of the human character, are Shakespearean in their impact.

No one chooses the correct course of action in "Rigoletto," a tragedy of errors.

The tragedy is heightened in this production, directed by Brad Dalton, conducted by Joseph Marcheso and featuring several outstanding voices in leading roles. Soprano Isabella Ivy, one of the company's new resident singers, grew steadily in her portrayal of Gilda, singing with remarkable ease and purity of tone, reaching up to capture the highest of silvery high notes. As Maddalena, the assassin's sister, mezzo-soprano Lisa Chavez -- who has returned for her second season of residency -- once again showed off her pudding-rich voice and passionate acting.

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Most notably, there was baritone Evan Brummel as Rigoletto, the court jester and right-hand man to the Duke of Mantua. A former resident singer, Brummel brought breadth to this demanding and complicated role, singing with meaty heft and character. Among his most impressive moments was one when Rigoletto -- a mocking and abusive figure, who assists the duke in his relentless



harassment of women -- looks into a mirror and sees who he really is.

He is a "buffoon," as the duke and his courtiers never fail to remind him. A

denigrated man, bitter and angry, he is filled with doubt -- not nearly so powerful as he publicly pretends. As Brummel confronted these sides of Rigoletto, his voice took on corresponding qualities: ghostly, disembodied, or storming.

Later, during the second act, there were moments when his voice seemed taxed by the role's constant demands. But mostly, Brummel's was an impressive and effecting performance. It was capped by his depiction of Rigoletto's love for Gilda, his daughter. She is "my whole world," the jester sings; she brings out his only goodness. Yet he inadvertently assists in her abduction, and, after the duke has sullied Gilda, Rigoletto, driven by vengeance, carelessly sets in motion the sequence of events that lead to her death.

(Brummel returns on Sept. 19. Baritone Matthew Hanscom, another new resident singer, sings the role of Rigoletto for the rest of the run.)

Less convincing among the leads was tenor Kirk Dougherty, another new resident, as the Duke. His voice has a pleasing foundation and lilt, but he seemed to be over-singing, pushing his notes, straining to project. He also strained to convey the Duke's flamboyance and cavalier arrogance. Yet in the final scene, Dougherty stepped up to deliver a ringing rendition of "La donna e mobile" ("Woman is flighty"), the Duke's sexist anthem.

There were other inconsistencies: During a stretch of the first act, Marcheso, the company's new music director, insisted on stubbornly slow tempos, robbing the unfolding drama of its pulse in the sequences leading up to Gilda's abduction. The singers -- Ivy, Brummel, Dougherty -- couldn't gain traction or generate heat. Key numbers, including Gilda's signature aria "Caro nome," came across as stilted.

But it wasn't long before the heat returned, in spades. During that final scene, the orchestra -- superb throughout -- powerfully impersonated the thunderous storm outside the inn, a metaphor for the violence to come.

The chorus, directed by Andrew Whitfield, was infectious, a key to several propulsive set numbers. Bass Silas Elash, tentative early on, later drew blood with his cutting voice as Sparafucile, the assassin. And there were robust baritones in secondary roles, Daniel Cilli as the courtier Marullo and Kiril Havezov as Count Monterone, who casts the famous curse upon Rigoletto and the Duke.

The production's period costumes, coordinated by Alyssa Oania, take the audience to 16th-century Mantua. The Duke's imposing palace, designed by Steven Kemp, emphasize the color scarlet: the color of lust, blood and devilish doings.

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Opera San Jose

Presenting "Rigoletto" with music by Giuseppe Verdi, libretto by Francesco Maria Piave
Through: Sept. 21

Next performance: 8 p.m., Sept. 11

Where: California Theatre, 345 S. First St, San Jose

Tickets: \$51-\$111; 408-437-4450, www.operasj.org

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