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Review: Opera San Jose's hilarious 'Italian Girl in Algiers'

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SAN JOSE -- Long before there was "Saturday Night Live," there was Gioachino Rossini, spoofing figures of arrogance and power, sticking pins into their big-belly egos. And now along comes Opera San Jose's new production of Rossini's "The Italian Girl in Algiers" ("L'Italiana in Algeri") at the California Theatre. Like Tina Fey mocking Sarah Palin, like Steve Martin doing the "King Tut," it's a howl, aiming its barbs at the puffed up ridiculousness of political power.

The production, which opened over the weekend, is expertly directed by Michael Shell, making his company debut and inspiring some of the snappiest ensemble performances of recent years at Opera San Jose. Its success is collective: sure pacing, clever gags and a cast that's on fire. The orchestra, conducted by Ming Luke, briskly underscores the madcap action.



Resident artist Lisa Chavez, front right, as Isabella with Nathan Stark as Mustafa in Opera San Jose's production of "The Italian Girl in Algiers." Photo by Pat Kirk. (Pat Kirk/Opera San Jose)

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In particular, there is one blow-you-away performance, by bass Nathan Stark, singing the role of Mustafa, the Bey of Algiers. At Sunday's performance -- the second of six, through Nov. 30 -- his stentorian voice was impressive, for sure. But more than that, Stark, also debuting with the company, is a natural comic actor with a memorably plastic face that puts his characterization of this wildly rich, lecherous, spoiled and foolhardy ruler over the top.

Briefly, for the sake of political correctness, it's time for a disclaimer.

The 1813 opera is a product of its era. Its references to Barbary Coast "barbarians" and "Turks" are offensive. Yet the libretto by Angelo Anelli also pokes fun at the nitwits among the cast's Italian characters, and Shell's direction universalizes the general silliness.



We're living in the age of Broadway's "The Book of Mormon," and if you can't laugh at this production -- say, its chorus of chubby, giggling court eunuchs, prancing about while serenading the Bey's wife, Elvira -- well, don't go.

Here's the story: Mustafa is tired of Elvira; she just doesn't do it for him anymore. So he orders Haly, his captain, to find him an Italian girl -- "one of those girls who drive Italian men crazy," he specifies. He plans to pawn off Elvira on his Italian slave, Lindoro, who still pines for the girl he left behind, Isabella.

Well, guess who soon arrives as a captive of the Bey's pirates? Of course: Isabella. Mustafa wants her.

She's smart as a whip, though, and quickly turns his plans upside down, leading Mustafa around by the nose, while also playing games with Lindoro and Taddeo, an immensely stupid Italian suitor. After the usual Rossini-esque machinations, all are returned to their original positions: Isabella with Lindoro, and shame-faced Mustafa (his kisser is covered here with spaghetti and butter) with the persevering Elvira.



Resident artist Lisa Chavez plays Isabella in the Opera San Jose production of "The Italian Girl in Algiers."
Photo by Pat Kirk. (Pat Kirk/Opera San Jose)

Among the rest of the cast, the acting is superb, the singing often very good.

As Taddeo, there was Matthew Hanscom, a ripe-voiced baritone -- and another natural comic. Mezzo-soprano Lisa Chavez was a charming Isabella, fun loving yet stately, though it took a while for her to relax into the role. She did in Act 2, when her voice took on its characteristic opulence.

As Lindoro, Michael Dailey's tenor -- lyric, soft-edged -- was lovely in his Act 1 cavatina, a song of longing (for Isabella), which he hugged, though

some high notes were pinched. As Elvira, soprano Isabela Ivy's voice was often pure-toned and sweet, though it thinned out during some of her big forte moments.

And yet -- this is nitpicking, really. It's not often that a cast comes together like this, with much beautiful singing, while having as much fun as it is creating for the audience. There were fine singers in supporting roles: mezzo-soprano Nikola Printz as Zulma, Elvira's attendant, and bass Silas Elash as Haly. Rossini's ensemble numbers were superb, especially the long Act I finale, which began like a sea breeze, then achieved the inevitable whirligig mayhem.

In the final scene of Act 2, Isabella aims her best and most ambitious barb at Mustafa: He is to be inducted into the Order of the "Pappataci," one of Italy's high honors, she convinces him. There is a ceremony and a banquet, during which Isabella grates Parmesan cheese into the proud Pappataci's giant bowl of spaghetti -- as she sang, Chavez's frantic grating matched the rhythms of the ensemble's rapid-fire patter, a great directorial touch.

It's not long before Mustafa realizes that he is being mocked -- and that he's had enough of this Italian girl. You, however, should go meet her at the California Theatre.

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Opera San Jose

Presenting "The Italian Girl in Algiers" ("L'Italiana in Algeri") Through: Nov. 30

Where: California Theatre, San Jose

Tickets: \$51-\$111; 408-437-4450, www.operasj.org; \$11 (cash only) for students 25 and younger with ID; 10 percent discount for ages 65 and older at box office starting 90 minutes before curtain

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