

## Arts



# 'The Italian Girl in Algiers' at the California Theatre

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San Jose Opera's attention to detail elevates an already superbly performed production of 'The Italian Girl in Algiers'

November 18, 2014 by Kevin Kirby



Resident Opera San Jose artist Lisa Chavez as Isabella with Nathan Stark as Mustafa in 'The Italian Girl in Algiers.' Photo by Pat Kirk.

An Ottoman ruler sits at a banquet table—wild-eyed, bewigged, nearly imbecilic with desire—waving great floppy fistfuls of spaghetti at his escaping slaves. It's hardly the image that comes to mind when you think of classical opera, but it's exactly what you get in Opera San Jose's dizzyingly comic production of Gioachino Rossini's *The Italian Girl in Algiers*, now playing at [the California Theatre](#).

The Italian Girl in Algiers is one of Rossini's early works, written when he was barely 21. Working from a libretto by Angelo Anelli, Rossini completed *L'italiana in Algeri* in less than four weeks. It bears the assurance of a

seasoned composer, but its ceaseless energy hints at Rossini's youth.

Typical of the opera buffa (or comic opera) style, the plot is pure fluff—an improbable confection of shipwrecks, concealed identities, and romantic machinations, set in the exotic opulence of Turkish-ruled North Africa.

Mustafa, ruler of Algiers, is tired of his wife, Elvira, and plans to marry her off to his Italian slave, Lindoro. Bored with his harem as well, Mustafa declares that he wants a fiery Italian woman as his next bride. Coincidentally, an Italian ship soon flounders off the coast, and Mustafa's Barbary pirates bring the spoils to the palace—including Isabella, an Italian beauty as crafty as she is headstrong. Mustafa falls for her immediately and vows to "tame her."

Isabella, of course, has her own agenda. She has come to Algiers searching for her lover, Lindoro, who has been missing since a similar shipwreck led to his enslavement. She is accompanied by Taddeo, an aging suitor whom she passes off as her uncle in order to save him from the jealous Mustafa.



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The ensuing battle of wits and wills is ludicrously one-sided, and the plot's resolution contrived, but it doesn't really matter. In opera buffa, the story is merely a vehicle for the delivery of hummable tunes and belly laughs.

Rossini has provided the tunes—a parade of melodies that sparkle under the sensitive baton of conductor Ming Luke—and the laughs are provided in abundance by the Opera San Jose cast, led by stage director Michael Shell.

From the very first note of the overture, you know you are in good hands musically. Luke's orchestra responds like a finely tuned Italian sports car, and the acoustics of the California Theatre allow the ensemble to show off its full dynamic range while never overpowering the singers.

The singing is also impressive. Lisa Chavez brings a warm, beguiling mezzo to the role of Isabella, with the full power of her voice revealed in the opera's second act, as she rouses the patriotism of Mustafa's many Italian slaves to aid in her escape plan. As Lindoro, Michael Dailey has a mellifluous, woody tenor, though his voice sounded a tad rehearsal-weary on opening night. Bass Nathan Stark (Mustafa) and baritone Matthew Hanscom (Taddeo) have surprisingly flexible, expressive voices, and the other featured singers grace the stage with confident, polished vocals.

Opera San Jose understands that a great orchestra and lovely singing are not enough—that opera is a theatrical as well as a musical form. What makes their Italian Girl truly wonderful is the comic brio that infuses every element of the production.

Stark is the stand-out comic performer in the piece. His buffoonish Mustafa growls and whines, blusters and gapes, while engaging in a barrage of physical schtick that words cannot capture. Among a weaker cast, he would easily steal the show, but his costars give him a run for his money. As the ill-used Taddeo, Hanscom has a particularly good opportunity to show his comic chops, and even the men's chorus (pirates, slaves and eunuchs) earns a few good guffaws.

And it's not just the singers; the entire production team is in on the fun. Scenery designer Steven Kemp provides an elaborately patterned Turkish facade punctured by concealed doors and windows, the Ottoman version of Laugh In's iconic joke wall. Costumer John Lehmeyer gives Mustafa (and later Taddeo) a sultan's headdress large enough to have its own gravitational pull. Even the shipwreck gets a laugh, presented in a style that recalls Terry Gilliam's cut-out animations for Monty Python's Flying Circus.

The production is not perfect. Some of the vocal runs are muddy, and there are a few places (notably the frenetic septet during the first act's climax) where the tempo onstage does not quite mesh with the tempo from the pit. But these are minor issues in an otherwise wholly enjoyable affair. This Italian Girl is well worth your time.

## The Italian Girl in Algiers

[The California Theatre](#)



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