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A Classic Take On A Classic Opera

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Opera San Jose's production of Mozart's 'The Magic Flute' hits all the right notes

April 23, 2015 by Tad Malone



Kirk Dougherty as "Tamino" discusses the demise of the dragon with Matthew Hansom as "Papageno" in "The Magic Flute."
Photograph by Pat Kirk

Just as it did at its premiere in Vienna in August 1791, *The Magic Flute* opened at the California Theatre to a sold-out theater. The classic opera by Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart and librettist Emanuel Schikaneder explores themes of love, knowledge, death, and the Enlightenment and has been a mainstay of opera houses throughout the world for centuries.

The show—playing through May 3 at the California Theatre—opens with the protagonist, Tamino (played by Kirk Dougherty) being chased by a serpent and seeking refuge with the gods. After he faints, three ladies appear and dispatch the snake. A man with a

birdcage named Papageno (played by Matthew Hansom) arrives claiming the snake as his kill and immediately strikes up a partnership with Tamino. The three ladies show a revived Tamino a picture of the princess Pamina, played by Hae Ji Chang, with whom he immediately falls in love—but it's not without a catch. On behalf of the Queen of the Night, Tamino is instructed by the ladies to save her daughter Pamina from the supposedly evil Sarastro (played by Silas Elash). Tamino and Papageno are guided by three child-spirits to Sarastro's temple, where they endure a series of events to win back Pamina, and ultimately uncover the queen's secret plot to marry her daughter to Sarastro's villainous assistant Monostatos (played by David Margulies). You didn't expect a simple story, did you?

While each performer rose to the occasion, both Hansom as Papageno, and Isabel Ivy as the Queen of the Night, were vocally exceptional. Other notable performances include the humorous interplay between the three ladies, played by Elizabeth Baldwin, Lisa Chavez and Chloe Smart.

The richly symbolic plot is supported by a strong musical accompaniment, and the cast is made up of a range of impressive vocal talents, so much so that one almost forgets the ability required to hit some of those notes. Acting-wise, the performances sometimes seem over-the-

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top—but then again, it's Mozart. Nevertheless, a humorous, if not slapstick, atmosphere pervades the show, supplemented by the rhapsodic score.



Kirk Dougherty as "Tamino" encounters a dragon in "The Magic Flute." *Photograph by Pat Kirk*

The child performers—often unrecognized in productions of *The Magic Flute*—play a major role in the both the ensemble cast, as well as providing supplemental dynamics to the action on the stage. They also provide surprisingly useful vocal support, as well as giving perspective to the show's effortless choreography. Incorporating everything from palatial palaces, to eastern desert landscapes, the sets seamlessly transition between time and place, and even into otherworldly planes. Expressionistic palm trees, rocks, and pyramids are some notable features of the minimal but looming set design.

Certain creative liberties are taken, but they don't cheapen the quality of the show. The singspiel, or spoken dialogue of the opera is adapted from German to English, with an accompanying subtitle screen above the stage—also in English. While some may see this as redundant, even overkill, it also allows for a greater understanding of the material and gives context to nuances of the plot that would be otherwise lost.

The story of *The Magic Flute* is about the search for truth and love, as well as a meditation on mankind's drive to learn. However, it should be noted that, like many of Mozart's pieces, *The Magic Flute* has strong freemasonry influences, a reflection of the composer's own philosophical leanings. While The Queen of Night represents anti-masonic ideals, Sarastro represents the antithesis—ruling through principles of wisdom and reason—and overall the opera presents a narrative of the yearning for enlightenment.

At its core, *The Magic Flute* is a didactic lesson on the progression of mankind from savagery through superstition to wisdom. Yet it isn't preachy. The lamentations on the chaos of humans and nature versus the affirmation of a rational, enlightened world are expressed with conviction, without being self-righteous (no doubt smoothed by the orchestra's impeccable performance).

Due to its comical grandeur and strong message, *The Magic Flute* has always been seen as one of the more accessible operas, despite its age. There is good reason why it is still one of the most performed operas in the world. The story is timelessness in terms of outlandish human interactions and epic story elements. Though the principles of the freemasonry sometimes stifle the story, they also give it a grandness that makes *The Magic Flute* come to life.

Staying true to the original opera, *The Magic Flute* at the San Jose Opera House is a funny, endearing, light-hearted and accessible show that has the potential to create a new generation

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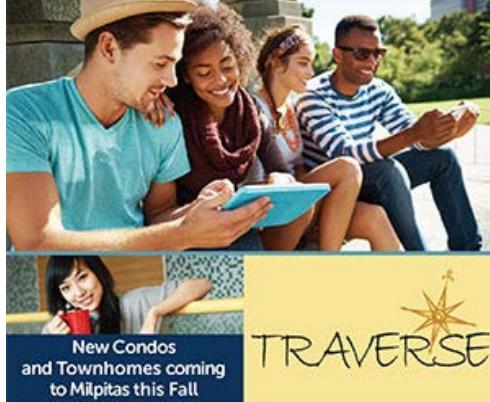
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