

OPERAVILLE

TUESDAY, NOVEMBER 15, 2016

A Truly Buggy Barber

Opera San Jose's Barber of Seville

November 12, 2016



Kirk Dougherty as Almaviva, Colin Ramsey as Basilio, Brian James Myer as Figaro and Renee Rapier as Rosina. All photos by Pat Kirk.

It would appear that the baby boomers who learned their opera from Bugs Bunny have finally taken over the opera house. When the silhouette of a carrot appeared on the curtain during the overture, the audience erupted in laughter, so much that an elderly patron complained it had "spoiled a perfectly beautiful piece of music." The overture (if you weren't aware) provided the soundtrack for Warner Brothers' iconic 1950 Rossini tribute, "Rabbit of Seville."

Carrots appeared in the production, as well, but that's about as far as it went. Under the direction of Layna Chianakas, the performance offered that delicious Marx Brothers sense of barely controlled

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ABOUT ME



 MICHAEL J. VAUGHN



Brian James Myer as Figaro.

chaos, but somehow lacked a unifying vision. (Come to think of it, why not a Marx Brothers "Barber"? The Figaro-Groucho-Bugs lineage is not so far-fetched.)

Brian James Myer is a ridiculously

talented Figaro, exhibiting notes both falsetto and basso profundo in his deft attack on the role. In his "Largo al factotum" (featured in the 1949 Bugs cartoon "Long-Haired Hare"), Myer extended the end of one line to the beginning of the next, serving to smooth out a piece that can easily fall into the herky-jerky. The general impression is of a guy on a corner, simply talking about his job, even when the patter is coming fast and furious. (And check out the wild wigs sculpted by Christina Martin.)

It could be that the odd sense of cast disunity came from the fact that no one was going to be anywhere near as smooth as Myer, although Kirk Dougherty gave it a solid run as Count Almaviva. Dougherty's tenor was as lyric and smooth as ever, and he threw in a bonus by accompanying himself on guitar in the serenade "Se il mio nome." He and Myer matched up well in the plot-making duet, "All'idea di quel metallo." The two disguises he undertook to sneak into Rosina's house were an even split: the nasal voice-teacher was hilarious, but the drunken-soldier routine fell a little flat.

Michael J. Vaughn is the author of seventeen novels, including *The Popcorn Girl* and *Billy Saddle*. His poetry has appeared in more than 100 journals, and he works as a competitions judge for *Writer's Digest*. He lives in San Jose, and plays drums for the San Francisco rock band *Exit Wonderland*.

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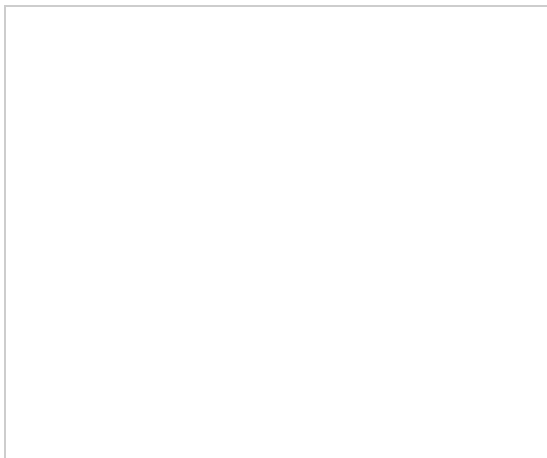


Kirk Dougherty as Almaviva, Renee Rapier as Rosina.

Vocally, our Rosina, mezzo Renée Rapier, was a fascinating trip. The opening lines of the cavatina, “Una voce poco fa,” seemed a little dark and covered, but rising into the upper reaches her tone opened up gloriously, and in the ensemble numbers of the second act she exhibited moments of great power. In the area of acting, Rapier had that unsettling look of thinking about her next move. She didn’t necessarily harm the comic interplay, but a good Rosina will break the ingenue mold and actually add to the pot.

Bass-baritone Valerian Ruminski seemed willing to make any face and suffer any humiliation to make his Dr. Bartolo more pathetic. His jealous aria, “A un dottor della mia sorte,” was masterful, and his bad singing in the music lesson scene was hilarious. As Basilio, Colin Ramsey resembled a kind of Rocky Horror English professor, constantly entering from the bathroom after a toilet flush (nitpick: an *anachronistic* toilet flush). But even this level of silliness could not hide his lush tone, notably in the song of slander, “La calunnia è un venticello.” I also enjoyed the efforts of baritone Babatunde Akinboboye as Almaviva’s lieutenant, Fiorello, and mezzo Teresa Foss the cat-accumulating maid Berta, lamenting the foolishness of May-December romances in “Il vecchiotto cerca moglie.”

Chorus master Andrew Whitfield took the podium to lead the orchestra in a suitably breezy reading (driving right through all that carrot-laughter). Kent Dorsey provided some effective



Satanic underlighting for Basilio's "La calunnia." Matthew Antaky's set design was fairly period-standard but meticulous, particularly the Tuscan look of the stairway walls. The lower room featured



Valerian Ruminski as Bartolo.

a portrait of late OSJ founder Irene Dalis, a touching addition. And it's always fun to listen to the recitative interplay between Veronika Agronov-Dafoe's harpsichord and the singers, which themselves seem like miniature conversations. I'm also happy that Figaro, after hours of pretend-eating, finally got to have a real bite of that carrot at the final curtain.

Through Nov. 27 at California Theatre, 345 S. First Street, San Jose. 408/437-4450, operasj.org. (Note: Matthew Hanscom will play Figaro on 11/27.)

Michael J. Vaughn is a thirty-year opera critic and author of the novels Gabriella's Voice and Operaville. His best-selling novel The Popcorn Girl may be read for free at writerville.blogspot.com

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