



# Young Love

**CLASSIC CHARACTERS** One of the most-performed operas in the repertoire, 'La Bohème' returns to San Jose.

## Opera San Jose stages updated Puccini classic, 'La Bohème'

**BY TAD MALONE**

**O**H, TO BE in love! Opera San Jose's newest production of *La Bohème*, Giacomo Puccini's classic opera, is a rambling trip through the lives and loves of French bohemians in Paris at the turn of the century.

Premiering originally in 1896 at Teatro Regio in Turin, Italy, *La Bohème* has since its inception induced polarizing opinions in its viewers. While it's always been a crowd favorite, critics have historically been less favorable, often complaining about

the simplicity of the libretto's musical accompaniment. Fortunately for Opera San Jose, neither is an obstacle, with its powerful rendition only transmitting the quality of the original.

And whereas the original takes place during the 1840s in France, the timeline for Opera San Jose's rendition is scooted ahead a little to the aftermath of the Great War, giving the setting a more hopeful, reconciled energy.

*La Bohème* opens in a house in the Quartier Latin neighborhood of Paris, populated by four artistic types: a painter, a writer, a musician and a blind philosopher—and all are freezing from the lack of money to build a fire. After Schaunard, the musician, returns with food and cash and they all trick their landlord, the gang is momentarily free from their economic concerns,

and go out to eat. Rodolfo, the writer, stays behind for a moment to finish an article. But before he can leave, a neighbor woman knocks at the door seeking matches for her own stove. After she drops her key in the darkness, the pair catch sight of each other in the moonlight and instantly fall in love, commencing a beautiful yet ultimately tragic love affair marked by destiny, disease, poverty and regret.

The entire cast is in top form, from ensemble bit characters to the lead performers. Matthew Hanscom as Marcello, the painter, is funny, endearing and moves with a cadence informed by the character's relatable energy. That goes for the rest of the roommates; Brian James Myer as Schaunard is silly and incredibly likable. And Colin Ramsay as the blind philosopher Colline is fantastic in his fraternal accompaniment, punctuated by his comedic physicality and a rich bass voice.

Sylvia Lee, as Mimi, has a believable chemistry and portrays the character

as fragile, yet powerful in spirit. Lee's portrayal finds a match in her incredible soprano voice, which like blue baroque glass, is delicate yet powerful in its crystalline luster.

However, the two standout performances belong to Kirk Dougherty and Vanessa Becerra. Dougherty, as Rodolfo the writer, is funny, sanguine, and deeply expressive, with his clear tenor reaching great heights. Becerra, as Musette, is charming, disarming and impeccable in her portrayal of Marcello's lover and sings in a towering range.

That goes for the ensemble too. Although their appearance is brief, it is a bright, multi-faceted sight to behold and speaks to Opera San Jose's always impeccable choreography and pacing.

In fact, most aspects of Opera San Jose's *La Bohème* are demonstrations of the company's precise professionalism. From the creatives' run-down apartment to the cobbled streets of the Quartier Latin, each set used for the opera's four acts exist as singular portraits of Parisian life, complete with vibrant color and detailed to an impressive degree. This sense of detail and composition extends through the production, beyond the ornate costumes and sets, touching everything from the minutia of interactions between bit characters to the interrogative dance of fateful desire between Mimi and Rodolfo.

The production is both tragic and hilarious, with each end of the emotional spectrum imparted to the audience without ever coming off as one-dimensional. Instead the characters and the almost-living, breathing set move together in a rapturous, silly—and above all—emotive display.

It's hard to find fault in Opera San Jose's adaptation of Puccini's *La Bohème*. From stage design, to choreography, and especially to the incredible vocal performances, this version of *La Bohème* is a high-water mark of the season.

Ultimately, this production of *La Bohème* is a wonderful, funny and heartbreaking composition, only furthering Opera San Jose's growing reputation for excellence.

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LA BOHÈME

\$55+

California Theatre, San Jose