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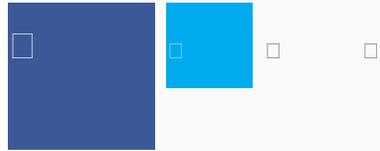


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Opera San Jose mounts a 'La Boheme' for our times



SJM-BOHEME-0417-02

Kirk Dougherty (as Rodolfo) and Sylvia Lee (Mimi) deliver powerful performances in Opera San Jose's new production of "La Boheme." Pat Kirk/Opera San Jose

By **GEORGIA ROWE, CORRESPONDENT** | Mercury News

PUBLISHED: April 16, 2017 at 11:08 am | UPDATED: April 17, 2017 at 4:39 am

There's a moment in Act III of "La Bohème" when the young lovers Mimi and Rodolfo, meeting outside an inn on a freezing winter night, sing longingly about the warmth of April.

It's just a brief episode, but it's an uncommonly poignant one, and at Opera San Jose's vibrant opening night performance of Puccini's opera Saturday at the California Theater, it seemed to radiate warmth as only this evergreen masterpiece can.

For operagoers who have experienced "Bohème" numerous times – and that includes pretty much anyone

who attends live opera on a regular basis – the 1896 melodrama about struggling young artists enduring a Parisian winter can be easy to dismiss.

But when the piece is performed with the kind of vocal assurance and dramatic flair that was in evidence throughout Saturday's opening, it's a wonderful night in the theater – and a bracing reminder that our own young artists are still struggling to survive in freezing garrets, and the divide between rich and poor is growing wider than ever.

This revival, directed by Michael Shell and conducted by Joseph Marcheso, caps a strong Opera San Jose season that included Donizetti's "Lucia di Lammermoor," Rossini's "The Barber of Seville," and Kevin Puts' "Silent Night," and it boasts a sturdy, faithful staging and a youthful, fully engaged cast.

Saturday, the quartet of singers at the center of the opera was especially vivacious, beginning with the Mimi of Sylvia Lee, whose lithe, pure-toned soprano projected the consumptive seamstress' girlish sweetness in silvery, forthright phrasing (Lee repeats the performance on April 20 and 30; soprano Julie Adams will sing the role April 16, 23, and 28).

As Mimi's lover, the poet Rodolfo, resident tenor Kirk Dougherty made his finest company outing to date. Singing with power, focus and elegant musical line, he delivered his Act I aria, "Che gelida manina," with ardor and generous, ringing tone.

Baritone Matthew Hanscom sounded impressively robust throughout the evening, offering a likeable, big-hearted characterization as Rodolfo's painter friend, Marcello. The production's surprise entry was soprano Vanessa Becerra, who made her company debut as an opulent-voiced Musetta in the Café Momus scene.

As the philosopher Colline, bass-baritone Colin Ramsey gave an assured performance of the Act IV coat aria. Baritone Brian James Myer brought energy and depth to the musician Schaunard. Baritone Carl King was amusing as the landlord, Benoit, and bass-baritone Vagarsh Martirosyan was Musetta's elderly sugar daddy, Alcindoro. The Opera San Jose Chorus made well-calibrated contributions in the Act II crowd scenes.



There are a few unusual touches in Shell’s production, which unfolds on effective sets by Kim A. Tolman, with lighting by Pamila Z. Gray and costumes by Alina Bokovikova. Act I opens on Christmas Eve, and Shell moves it forward a few years, to the first Christmas Eve after World War I. Colline is blind – perhaps from an injury sustained in the war – and he and Schaunard seem to suggest a closer relationship than we see in most productions of this opera. No matter – this is still the “La Bohème” opera fans love, with all of Puccini’s warmth, heartache and enduring music intact.

OPERA SAN JOSE

Presents Puccini’s “La Boheme”

When: through April 30

Where: California Theatre, San Jose

Tickets: \$56-\$176; 408-437-4450; www.operasj.org.

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Georgia Rowe, Correspondent

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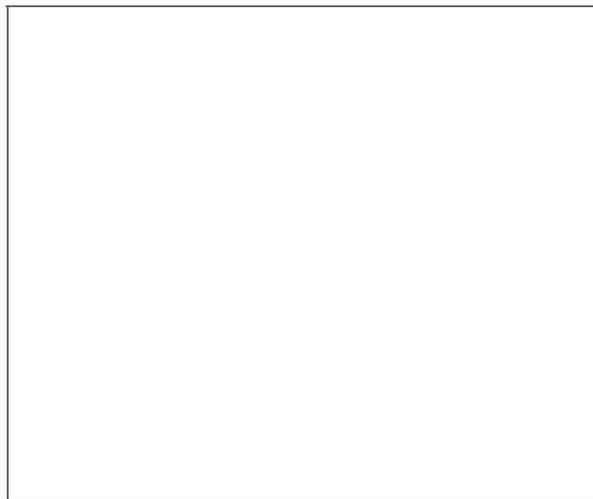
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April 18, 2017, 11:41 am

Jessica Alba, Shonda Rhimes and Tony Hawk were among the celebrity entrepreneurs to attend the 2017 Success Makers Summit in New York.

Find out how Radiohead rewarded diehard fans in Berkeley

April 18, 2017, 11:27 am

The rain? No problem. Radiohead delivered a gorgeous show in Berkeley with cuts from throughout its catalog.

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Coachella: Man arrested with over 100 cell phones in backpack

April 18, 2017, 8:40 am

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'Dancing With the Stars': Normani dazzles, Simone scores 10s, Erika sent home

April 18, 2017, 11:32 am

On much-anticipated Disney Night, Erika Jayne and Gleb Savchenko had a great dance but were still eliminated from the competition.

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