

metroactive | ARTS



Robert Shonler

Crazy, Stupid, Love

BYE BOY Amanda Kingston as Fiordiligi and David Blalock as Ferrando in Opera San Jose's production of 'Così Fan Tutte.'

Opera San Jose offers a zany take on Mozart's 'Così Fan Tutte'

BY TAD MALONE

COSÌ FAN TUTTE, one of Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart's more tawdry operas, is making its premiere at Opera San Jose. The production deals with the consequences of testing the limits of love and has become one of the most frequently performed operas in the world.

Considered an Opera Buffa, *Così fan tutte* departs from the normal operatic affair of gods and heroes, instead delving into the comedy found in everyday life, particularly in the arena of love. Reminiscent of Shakespeare's *The Taming of the Shrew* and *Cymbeline*—and with nods to Ovid's *Metamorphoses*—the opera uses the theme of “love-swapping”

or “fiancée-swapping” as its main conceit. As such, the opera has gained a reputation for its risqué portrayals of sex.

The story opens on a fencing class. Between duels, military officers Guglielmo and Ferrando declare the love of their women to be eternal and everlasting. A bystander and friend of the officers—the wise and cynical Don Alfonso—suggests that the men are naive in thinking that their fiancées' love is so pure. Guglielmo and Ferrando take offense, challenging Don Alfonso to a duel.

Don Alfonso counters, wagering that he can prove all women are fickle—even the officers' beloved Dorabella and Fiordiligi. The men accept, and soon they are pretending to be called off to war, then disguising themselves in Eastern European garb and false mustaches, as they attempt to seduce each other's lover.

At first, Dorabella and Fiordiligi

are perplexed at their new “Albanian” guests, and are just as quick to deny their advances. But with a little finagling, lying, and with the added support of Don Alfonso (along with the ever-changing personas of chambermaid Despina), Ferrando and Guglielmo soon get in over their heads, risking their lovers for the sake of a misogynist gamble.

Set in the Baroque period, the costumes and backdrops for *Così fan tutte* are as ornate as they are minimal. High-vaulted ballrooms make up much of the show's scenery, with ensemble members moving in different pieces, depending on the scene. This gives the show a vignette type quality without getting lost in a variety of ambiances.

Così fan tutte is absurd, in the literary sense. However, Opera San Jose's fantastic cast of performers help immensely with the suspension of disbelief. It's the actors that define these scenes, and the small but tight cast sees the show through to a funny, heartwarming end.

Malcolm MacKenzie strikes a delicate balance with Don Alfonso—painting the man as both conniving

and disarmingly charismatic. MacKenzie's voice is deep, yet warm and textured, cresting on high notes before expanding into mellifluous refrains. The men and women players here share an undeniable chemistry. Ferrando and Guglielmo pair well with Dorabella and Fiordiligi—mirroring each other in reactions and affectations, which ultimately roots the comedy of the show in the intimacy of interpersonal relationships.

David Blalock as Ferrando is loose and goofy, with a voice that is carefully tempered, only lashing out gallantly in opportune moments. Ferrando is the messier of the pair, which gives the character more believability and provides more room for physical comedy.

Colin Ramsey as Guglielmo is less animated but makes up for it with a killer voice, so deep and poised it almost betrays his delicate features.

Cassandra Zoé Velasco as Dorabella is both astute and suggestive, with a strong voice that is as striking as it is thoughtful—almost wise in its delivery.

Amanda Kingston as Fiordiligi is equally gullible and prone to emotion, which she transmits through a delicate voice that seems to rise up from silence, wavering until it explodes in exuberant, animated crescendos.

Maria Valdes as Despina is crafty, shrewd and motivated to bring some color to her banal position in life. Her voice is sad but strong, almost sly, which is emblematic of her character. She steals many scenes with her libidinous antics.

Together, the cast weaves a funny, cartoonish tale. The music is light and breezy to match, consisting of many lush harmonies and refrains, with even the most uproarious vocal performances retaining a quiet sublimity.

Speaking of quiet sublimity, the costumes consist of fine trims, gilded textures and coiffed hairstyles, giving the show a certain understated elegance. And that's what ultimately makes Opera San Jose's *Così fan tutte*—the details. With this production, Opera San Jose succeeds in centering the poignant beauty of the intimate moment over loud, flashy operatics.

THRU SEP	COSÌ FAN TUTTE
24	California Theatre, San Jose
\$55+	operasj.org