



OPERAVILLE

MONDAY, APRIL 16, 2018

Power Voices at San Jose's Traviata



Pene Pati as Alfredo, Amanda Kingston as Violetta.

Opera San Jose
Verdi's La Traviata
April 14, 2018

There were some resounding voices coming from the California Theatre Saturday as Opera San Jose gave *The Lady of the Camellias* the royal treatment. The most startling of these belonged to Pene Pati, the New Zealand tenor who has already become an Adler Fellow at San Francisco Opera and performed for that company in *Rigoletto* as the Duke of Mantua.

Pati announced his presence right away, in the opening scene's "Di quell'amor," delivering a tone that was (dare we say it?) Lucianoan, gorgeously clear and fluid, with careful attention to phrasing and rolled r's (an art form in itself). The countryside monologues of the second act were a delight, as Alfredo exulted in his new love. In the Act

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ABOUT ME



 MICHAEL J. VAUGHN

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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2 party scene, he showed that lyric can still be fierce, adding searing top notes to an already tense situation.

Amanda Kingston is no surprise at all – we've been enjoying her voice for a while now – but what really comes out here is her emotive abilities. The vocal work of the "Sempre libera" scene, in which she ping-pongs between love and freedom, is challenging enough, but she really makes us *feel* her dilemma. Over the course of the opera, the quality of her acting makes one really understand the particular tortures that Violetta goes through. After the death scene, I felt completely wrung out.



Flora (Christina Pezzarossi), Violetta (Amanda Kingston) and
Dr. Grenvil (Colin Ramsey)

A distinctive magic emanated from the duets. Pati and Kingston showed a rare ability to take intimate moments and project them to the balconies. The a capella sections of "Di quell'amor" were particularly sexy. Alfredo held on to the folds of Violetta's dress as the two of them sang with their faces inches apart, their voices seeming to mix there before flying beyond the stage. This moment seemed to repeat itself in the final-act duet, "Parigi, o cara," the last time that Alfredo and Violetta believe they might have a future together.

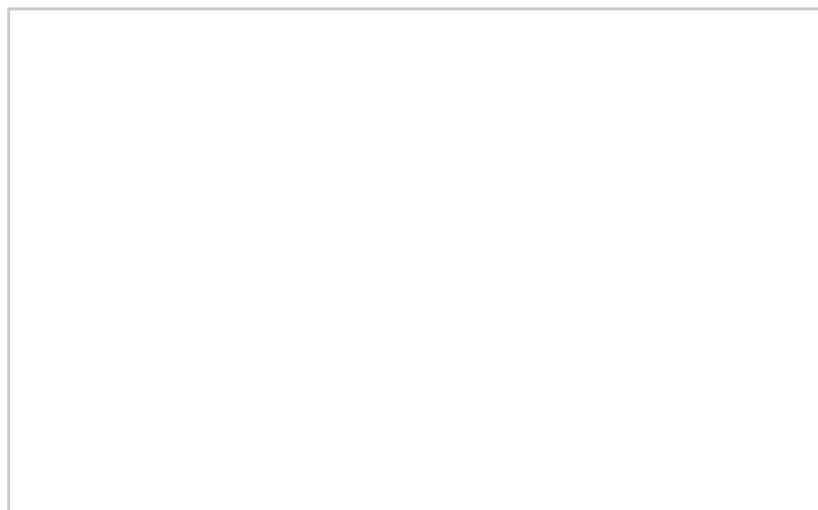
After the listener has already been wowed by these two, in walks Malcolm McKenzie, whose baritone is stunningly powerful. His character, Giorgio Germont, Alfredo's father, is problematic in that he performs terrible misdeeds but is later supposed to elicit a certain forgiveness from the audience. Given the raw materials at hand, McKenzie and stage director Shawna Lucey wisely play Giorgio big and authoritarian. They signal his bad attitude by having him abuse a servant on the way in. It could be that same power that lends a certain

weight to his deathbed *mea culpas*. (I'm still not buying it, but that's the story's fault, not the performers.)

The OSJ cast demonstrates impressive strength in the supporting roles. Soprano Erin O'Meally is lovely as Violetta's maid, Annina, lending authentic feeling to her concerns over her beleaguered mistress. Colin Ramsey displays his fathoms-deep bass in the rather brief role of Dr. Grenvil. Babatunde Akinboboye has entirely too much fun with Marchese D'Obigny, who spends Flora's party delving into domination, foot fetishes and cross-dressing. Philip Skinner gives the Baron Douphol a delicious sense of entitlement (Skinner has the perfect face for an opera aristocrat). And I was disappointed that Mason Gates didn't have more singing to do as Gastone.

Lucey's direction inspired a *lot* of energy in the party scenes. The Act I fest is a barely controlled chaos, and I appreciate the attention given to chorus members, who are not just milling about but having their own little dramas (games of musical chairs, beating each other over the head). At one point, a wayward couple walks right between Violetta and Germont during their sung conversation, which is *such* a party thing. Flora's Act 2 Spanish party is even wilder, and the chorus women's gypsy dances are amateur in the best sense of the word.

This sense of attentiveness came out, also, in the pivotal moments. The Cash Throw, in which the spurned Alfredo tosses a wad of bills at Violetta, is one of the more deliciously rude moments in opera. Pati delivers this with a bit of a backswing, like a bowler in a cricket match (and yes, I had to look that up). Kingston reacted by dropping to her knees with a crazy smile (as if to say, "How much worse can this get?") and collapsing into the arms of her friends. The whole scene is incredibly tense. From there, the women reject their men one by one; my companion, Lady Platinum, disliked the sameness of the motion, as it negates the snowflake variation of relationships. The men line up in a tuxedoed squadron against the interloper (not knowing that he's not really at fault, either).

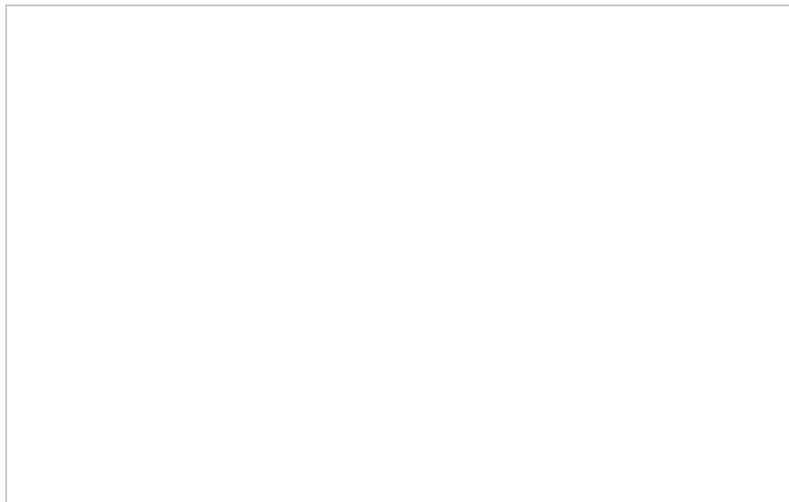




Violetta (Amanda Kingston) and Giorgio Germont (Malcolm McKenzie)

Then there's the Sudden Death, Violetta's surge of energy just before she passes. In this case, she embraces Alfredo and then suddenly goes limp in his arms. This is another case of Lucey directing to the traits of her singers. Pati is a large, powerful man, so lifting Kingston as the curtain falls is a doable feat, and a striking image.

I am still trying to figure out how conductor Joseph Marcheso began the overture without the standard conductor's applause. Very sneaky! I always enjoy his direction, but there were a couple of nits to pick. Kingston's "Sempre libera" cadenzas felt a little rushed, and a bit later he cut off an applause. A particular highlight came in the haunting strings of the Act 3 prelude. Veronika Agranov-Dafoe's rehearsal work was, as always, impeccable. The unexpected standout among Elizabeth Poindexter's costumes was Annina's brown traveling outfit, quite the smart number. Eric Flatmo's set design was particularly nimble, like a mannequin wearing different clothing for each act. The country scene featured an especially attractive stone hearth.





The dance of the Gypsy ladies.

I was telling my date about the \$75 million renovation to the California Theatre when there was a mixup with my tickets. An oddly friendly older patron immediately adopted my case and took me to the box office to straighten things out. I was just thinking, Who the hell *is* this guy? when he introduced himself as David Packard, the man who renovated the theater! (Also, yes, heir to the Hewlett-Packard technodynasty.) I was thrilled to offer him a very tardy thank you for the California and Palo Alto's Stanford Theater, and eventually, to get my tickets. Perhaps next season I'll run into Wozniak.

Through April 29 at California Theatre, 345 S. First Street, San Jose. 408/437-4450, www.operasj.org. Alternating performers: Dane Suarez as Alfredo and Trevor Neal as Giorgio Germont (4/15, 4/27). OSJ's 2018-19 season will feature Mozart's *The Abduction from the Seraglio* (Sept. 15-30), Leoncavallo's *Pagliacci* (Nov. 18-Dec. 2), Heggie's *Moby Dick* (Feb. 9-24) and Puccini's *Madama Butterfly* (April 13-28).

Michael J. Vaughn is a thirty-year opera critic, novelist and [painter](#). Look for his titles [Operaville](#) and [Gabriella's Voice](#) at amazon.com.

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