

LYRIC OPERA

KANSAS CITY

LA BOHÈME

Giacomo Puccini 1896

March 15, 17, 19, 21, 23, 2014

"Boheme" catches hold of audience, never lets go

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By Kelly Luck

KCSTAGE

La Boheme holds a special place in the hearts of opera lovers: it is one of Puccini's most well known works, a favorite for first-time opera

attendees, a musical feast with a story that is simple and all too easy to lose oneself in. The storyline has been adapted multiple times by multiple artists, two of the most notable being "Moulin Rouge" and the watered-down version, "Rent". It masterfully balances between comedy and tragedy, Puccini's practiced hand drawing the audience on from beginning to end. One almost doesn't need translations to understand everything that is happening on stage, so expressive is the music. When this reviewer saw it for the first time so many years ago – my first ever time attending an opera, in fact – it packed an emotional punch that left yours truly an opera lover for life. Between now and then, many years have passed; I have seen poverty and comfort, I have loved and lost. I have sat weeping by the body of she I once thought the love of my life. And when Rodolfo breaks down by Mimi's lifeless form, it all comes back in a rush like never before.

The Lyric's new production is created very much in mindfulness of the work's emotional impact. Set more or less contemporary to its time of composition, we follow struggling poet Rodolfo (Giorgio Berrugi) and consumptive flower girl Mimi (Katie Van Kooten) as they meet, fall thoroughly in love, are driven apart and reunite just in time for Mimi to die with him. Rodolfo's bohemian friends Colline (Ben Wager), Schaunard (Marcus DeLoach), Marcello (Lucas Meachem) and his on/off lover Musetta (Ellie Dehn) accompany the two from winter through to spring: laughing, loving, fighting, and creating what art they can out of their lives.

The Lyric's presentation is a fairly traditional one, only moving the story up a few decades but keeping the general settings and so on. This is as well: a work like Boheme can be transposed to many times and places with ease, and still be perfectly at home where it started. R. Keith Brumley's set designs are excellent, particularly Act II's Latin Quarter, and the Lyric's set shop is to be commended as they really have been turning out superlative work this season.

I have mentioned before that sometimes the supporting characters can prove more interesting than the main ones, and indeed I think it indisputable that Marcello and Musetta are an engrossing couple – particularly in the hands of Meachem and Dehn. But even so, I must admit that Berugi and Van Kooten

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do most definitely take center stage and hold it throughout the production. Berugi is a marvellous tenor, making here his debut with the Lyric. His rendition of Che Gelida Manina fairly soars, and Ms Van Kooten's plaintive "Addio, senza rancor" at the end of Donde Lieta Uscì just tears your heart out. They have marvelous chemistry onstage, driving the poignancy of the story truly home.

It has been said that people who see Boheme as their first opera tend to come back for more. This reviewer can only say that for her, this was most certainly the case. As I looked around the audience last night, I found myself wondering how many people here were getting their first taste of this art form, and how many of that number would fall irretrievably in love with it as I did so long ago. In the capable hands of Director Linda Brovsky and her talented cast and crew, this is a decidedly easy thing to do.