

LYRIC OPERA

KANSAS CITY

THE CAPULETS & THE MONTAGUES

Vincenzo Bellini 1830

September 21, 25, 27, 29, 2013

Passionate, psychological 'Capulets and Montagues' features hometown diva Joyce DiDonato

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By Libby Hanssen

The Lyric Opera's production of "The Capulets and the Montagues" is not a love story. Rather, it is a message: in war, we are all victims.

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The story is not that of Shakespeare's "Romeo and Juliet." There are no impetuous teenagers here or comic monologues. This is about the complete breakdown from living in a constant state of uncertainty, about the reality of passion in a world gone awry. Vincenzo Bellini and librettist Felice Romani created a score that acts as a musically spiraling target - every moment, every character, every aria circle us closer and closer towards this result: Romeo's final "Addio."

Director Kevin Newbury honed in on the psychological trauma with a cast of impressive actors in Saturday evening's performance in Kauffman Theatre. Artistic director Ward Holmquist conducted the Kansas City Symphony, with excellent solos from cello, clarinet, horn and harp.

Designer Vita Tzykun's bank vault bunker was a mix of elegance and happenstance, the blue-gray marbled walls accented with dimmed brass work and retroactively fitted with gas masks, though Giulietta's hidden dressing room seemed weirdly opulent and out of place. Japhy Weideman's lighting design was stark and subtle, playing up shadows.

Of course, this is bel canto opera - ultimately it's about the voice. A robust male chorus, gilded by the female voices backstage, supported the cast of five in this emotionally saturated performance.

Soprano Nicole Cabell was an increasingly agitated Giulietta. She's the only female character, who alone carries the burden of purity and innocence, struggling between her passion for Romeo and her familial fealty.

Her Romeo was mezzo-soprano Joyce DiDonato, who returned to her Kansas City roots with a hero's welcome. DiDonato's masculine stance and mannerisms took awhile to sync, but her voice, rich and throaty in the low register, effortless and pristine when high, carried the soaring lines.

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Their duets were priceless and tender, completely absorbing, the final moments made all the more fragile and powerful as Romeo dies with a last, impossibly lingering pianissimo.

Bass-baritone Stephen Morscheck played Capellio with a stubborn animosity, whose grief blinds him to the battles no one else wants, including Lorenzo, the family doctor played by bass-baritone Julien Robbins, who aids the lovers in the hopes of forming a truce between factions.

William Burden was Tebaldo, a sympathetic role as Romeo's rival, with a heroic, majestic tenor.

Together, the Lyric Opera created a captivating, beautifully nuanced, life-changing performance.