

LYRIC OPERA

KANSAS CITY

THE ELIXIR OF LOVE

BY GAETANO DONIZETTI | MARCH 12, 16, 18 AND 20 2016

IN THE SERVICE OF MYTH: DONIZETTI FAVORITE CAN'T BE TAKEN TOO SERIOUSLY

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The Lyric Opera's production of Donizetti's frothy *The Elixir of Love*, which runs through March 20th at the Kauffman Center, has several things going for it. First, it offers richly detailed set designs by Allen Moyer, including a downstage curtain-drop painted in playful hues: a rural landscape in the style of Grant Wood that has the eye moving even before the action begins. Second, it trades on excellent singing, and since there's not much point to the story it's just as well that we can focus on the music here.

James Robinson's production, which debuted in Colorado and has made the rounds of several companies around the U.S., transfers the action from pastoral Italy to small-town America, and one thinks of *The Music Man* not just because of the period setting (early-20th-century Midwest) but because of the nature of its subject (a huckster selling bogus goods to people he deems gullible hicks). The costumes, wigs and makeup (by Martin Pakledinaz and Alison Hanks), were suitable to the period, and the musical direction by Christopher Allen was mostly solid and appropriately light-hearted. The chorus sang ably.

Susannah Biller appeared in the role of Adina, a weirdly fickle woman whose motivations one is best not to overanalyze. Her voice had a thrilling glow as well as plenty of agility in the rapid *bel canto* passagework (though on opening night it grew a bit hard in the second-act "Prendi, per me sei libero"). She was well-matched by Norman Reinhardt in the role of Nemorino, the humble ice-cream salesman who yearned to warm the heart of the chilly Adina. His tenor had body and heft: robust at the top and pleasant to hear. He sang "Una furtive lagrima" with tender restraint, though I wished for a bit more "opening-up" at the "M'ama! Sì, m'ama, lo vedo!" Eliot Madore sang the role of Sergeant Belcore with a nice dark baritone and a serious approach that contrasted with his sort of Jim Carrey zaniness. Patrick Carfizzi sang the part of Dulcamara, the salesman pushing a magic love-elixir that is actually just wine, with wit and vigor. Ashley Yvonne Wheat sang Gianetta with energy and lively presence.

Direction was mostly sure-footed, though at times the action drew our eyes away from the singer being featured. Adina made a big deal of drinking lemonade, stage-left, as Nemorino sang his opening "Quanto è bella" stage-right, so we ended up watching her instead of him. And during their duet "Chiedi all'aura lusinghiera," Nemorino was making Adina a parfait the whole time, and we became so engaged watching him that we didn't think much about what was being said about their relationship. There were some effective touches in sound design (by Michael Ferguson and Kathy Ruvuna), as when we heard but didn't see a motorcycle approaching "behind us," before it entered stage-left.

There is, to be sure, plenty of silliness throughout this opera, and when Adina does a sharp 180 at the end and declares she loves Nemorino after all, we suddenly feel we're in the eighth grade again. But then *Elixir* is not normally valued for its serious intent or dramatic "arc": It's a confection.