

LYRIC OPERA

KANSAS CITY

THE ITALIAN GIRL IN ALGIERS

BY GIOACHINO ROSSINI | NOVEMBER 8, 12, 14, 16, 2014

THE ITALIAN GIRL CONQUERS ALGIERS AND KANSAS CITY

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By Floyd Gingrich

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The Saturday evening opening of Giochino Rossini's *L'Italiana In Algeri* was an unmitigated success. There were no tinkering to be done; except the cheese, hold it like it weighs something, please. The cast was evenly expert in each part. The stage business, with possibly six things going on at a time on stage, created a lifelike environment, like what's going on at a church supper; there is never just one conversation.

Irene Roberts, in the role of Isabella, was a fine title character. She almost sneaked onto the stage, then slowly owned it. She fully filled the personification of a woman with whom a minor potentate can instantly fall in love, but also has the strength to decide her own fate, while observing the axiom, do no harm. Vocally, she was no compromise. Her coloratura (a coloratura mezzo?) passages were brilliantly light, the expression of her character's quandary brought the audience with her into the plot; her deep tones were complete, and sounded to the back of Kauffman Theater. Whether full sonority or a soft, passing thought, every sound was contemplated and put into place (in Joyce DiDonato's words, "take no syllable for granted") all the while following the lively actions required by director, Michael Cavanagh, who is reported to have said that they were putting a comic strip on stage to Rossini's glorious music. Ms Roberts sang one aria while behind a dressing screen changing (ahem) into something more comfortable, as three men were peeking through some curtains and singing cat-calls, and kept her *bel canto* legato going through all of the silliness.

In some shows, the love inspiration must simply be accepted by the audience; they're in love, live with it. In the role of Lindoro, Taylor Stayton was lovable. His initial aria *Languir per una bella*, immediately ensconced him as a man of powerful, lasting love, and a tenor of clear, evanescent, sound. No Wagnerian force in those high Cs, just a light, seemingly effortless (we all know it isn't) sound that floated from the stage, gently landing like bubbles throughout the room. Singing in his lower range, he could be identified as a baritone, rather than a strained push.

Patrick Carfizzi was a perfect Mustafa; comedic, vulnerable, physical, commander of the stage, and in possession of a magnificent bass voice. He even had some florid work that he negotiated very well, thank you. When called upon for a *Pappataci* contest (see the show for more information on *Pappataci*) he was indistinguishable from a braying bull whale. When the surrounding cast falls down as if blown by the sound, no imagination is needed.

Taddeo (Ben Wager) Isabella's companion and unwanted pursuer was the creator, or victim, of much of the Three Stooges-like antics that kept the show moving along. Having two accomplished basses in the same production is an abundance of riches seldom achieved. Throughout the opera he pulled off a load of physical comedy while maintaining his crisp, legato sound, and nearly matched Mustafa's volume (by deference, not ability).

Elvira, played by Heather Phillips (a former LOKC apprentice) had the job of not only singing of her actual love for Mustafa (who waits until late in the show to exhibit any appealing qualities) but making it believable, and a work of ephemeral art. Had she been unconvincing in those tasks, the audience's interest in her fate could easily have waned; no problem. Her full soprano expressed the long-suffering commitment of a mistreated woman who would never relinquish her ties to her life's companion.

Samantha Gossard (Elvira's maid, Zulma) was excellent as Elvira's confidant, and performed her vocal requirements gloriously. Elliot Harrison Brown (as Mustafa's oft-threatened right hand aide, Haly) was well-cast and his voice gave a full-bodied, rounded sound.

The chorus of men was well-rehearsed, sang well, and actually fulfilled the acting requirements of being on stage. The men frequently divided into little groupings, keeping multiple activities going, adding to the humor. The scenes of the Italian kitchen cavalry being whipped up to an angry froth by general Isabella were hilarious, while maintaining their musical coherence.

Any breakdown, musically or dramatically, would have lessened this production, but there was none. Ensemble thought was evident in this "Italian Girl," each member willingly contributing to a successful whole. Take advantage of the remaining performances to enjoy yourself, and bring your family or friends whom you would like to introduce to opera; it's a great show for those who love or can't spell opera. Contact Lyric Opera of Kansas City for times, tickets, or to offer production support.