

LYRIC OPERA

KANSAS CITY

THE ITALIAN GIRL IN ALGIERS

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

ROLLICK AND ROMP WITH ROSSINI

November 12, 2014

By Karen Hauge



These days it is an unquestionable fact that opera is an elevated art--and no wonder, since it requires such skill, dedication, and inspiration to realize works of such magnitude and historical significance. It's easy to forget, however, that at its core, opera was invented to be entertainment for the masses, accessible entertainment that jerked heart strings and provoked giggles and everything in between. Kansas City Lyric Opera's production of Gioachino Rossini's *L'Italiana in Algeri* plays all over this spectrum, but with a heavy dose of hilarity. The opening night house was brought down in fits of laughter by this creative production that was far from taking itself seriously.

Director Michael Cavanaugh has taken a few liberties with Angelo Anelli's already delightful libretto in order to bring it closer to a twenty-first century audience. Sassy protagonist Isabella, in the original version, sails into Algiers on a ship to rescue her love, Lindoro, from the court of Mustafa; in this production, she pilots her own biplane right onto the stage. In addition to introducing a little levity right from the beginning of the show (you haven't laughed until you've seen a model airplane putt-putt across the ceiling of Muriel Kauffman Theatre), this choice casts the character of Isabella (Irene Roberts) in a strong light; she becomes a modern gal in the style of a 1940s movie star, striding around the stage in pants and a leather jacket and charming the daylights out of the cast and audience alike.

Isabella's quest to recover Lindoro is complicated by the fact that the ruler Mustafa has rejected his wife Elvira and declared that he wants an Italian girl for his new wife. Inevitably, Isabella becomes the target of his misguided affections, so she has to find a way to redirect his love toward his miserable wife while simultaneously freeing Lindoro and escaping back to Italy. The plot is rife with opportunities for silliness, all of which are embraced in this production with clever choreography and fantastic comic acting from the company as a whole.

The wonderful thing about this production is that the entire lead cast is exceptional. Irene Roberts captures the independent and clever spirit of Isabella perfectly, her acting skills comparably matched to her singing skills, which are impressive indeed. Her rich mezzo was lush and supple, equally as capable of navigating Rossini's complicated patter as embracing the shades and nuances of a tender love song. Taylor Stayton portrays Lindoro as wistful but anxious as he searches for solutions to his sorry predicament; his clear tenor was compellingly variable, at times bright and brilliant, at others soft and sweet, effectively matching the peaks and valleys of emotional action in the plot. Patrick Carfizzi plays Mustafa, the laughable ruler of Algiers who believes he has fallen in love with Isabella and is subsequently duped into allowing her to go free. Carfizzi makes Mustafa almost pitifully clueless, using his nimble bass voice to extreme comedic effect. Isabella's neglected and disheveled suitor Taddeo (Ben Wager) follows her to Algiers and embarks on a fruitless quest to win her attention.

The principal cast is rounded out by some impressive local talent, taken from the Lyric Opera Apprentice program. The duo of Elvira and her servant Zulma is played by Heather Phillips and Samantha Gossard. In addition to being extremely capable singers, their partnership on stage was genuinely hilarious, with Phillips playing Elvira as hopelessly in love with her hopeless husband and Gossard as the servant who is about ready to slug Mustafa at any given moment for slighting her mistress. Elliot Harrison Brown as Mustafa's servant Haly is increasingly frantic as he is forced to ensnare Isabella on Mustafa's orders.

The production is infused with a modern sensibility of humor, which extends from the realm of slapstick physical comedy to more subtle suggestions, none of which I want to ruin for those of you readers who will be seeing this opera in days to come. I will offer only these buzz words to tantalize your imagination in the meantime: rubber ducky; dancing curtain rods; naked hairy man fat suit. Cavanaugh stuck joke after joke into the show, and not a single one fell short of cracking the audience up, achieving in spades his goal of the show not taking itself too seriously.

A few problems arose during the opening night performance. Notably, a handful of ensemble scenes in Act Two that featured complicated multi-part patter were very nearly in danger of falling completely apart, though they were held tightly together by conductor Leonardo Vordoni. These moments did ultimately drag down the pacing of Act Two, which ended up feeling hesitant and cautious after these run-ins with potential disaster. Additionally, some of the blocking during the show calls for numerous characters to sing while walking around the stage; whether an acoustic problem or one of balance, it became very difficult to hear anyone who was facing any direction other than dead front. This compromised some of the duo arias of the opera, which were otherwise very lovely.

Opera need not always be serious and self-conscious to be beautiful and meaningful. Michael Cavanaugh and the Lyric Opera have proven this many times over with this delightfully silly production of *L'Italiana in Algeri*, and Kansas City audiences can enjoy this lighthearted romp at three shows through November 16th.