

# LYRIC OPERA

KANSAS CITY

## THE ELIXIR OF LOVE

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

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‘ELIXIR’ NOT TERRIBLY ROBUST BUT GOES DOWN EASY

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By Kelly Luck

# KCSTAGE

The Lyric’s production of *The Elixir of Love* takes the Donizetti original and moves it from rural Italy to the early 20th century rural U.S., just before the outbreak of the first world war. It is an interesting move, and given the history of traveling medicine shows and ‘patent medicine’ huxters, and fits rather well. It is amusing and the characterizations make the transition with ease. But somehow it is the story that sticks to the mind, and puts one in a thoughtful frame of mind.

The story involves Nemorino (Norman Reinhardt, Ten), the village ice cream man secretly in love with Adina (Susannah Biller, Sopr). Unable to win her over, he watches helplessly as Sergeant Belcore (Elliot Madore, Bar) woos her successfully. When traveling Doctor Dulcamara (Patrick Carfizzi, Bass-Bar in an outfit that Caesar Romero’s Joker would like to get back) arrives in town, selling his various cure-alls, Nemorino jumps at the chance to get a love-philtre to turn Adina’s heart towards his.

There’s plenty of humor in the story, which relies for the most part on misunderstandings, deceptions, and characters dealing at cross-purposes with each other. Think Gilbert & Sullivan before Gilbert & Sullivan. Of course the doctor’s “elixir” is merely cheap wine, but human nature and mixed signals fill in the blanks (so to speak), allowing everyone a happy ending. Still, as one thinks about it, one realizes that what we have here are a group of rather terrible people.

Think about it: love potions have always been a popular bit of wish-fulfilment in literature going back ages, but actually they’re rather terrible. Consider: if A loves B who is indifferent to A, and A uses a potion to make B fall in love with them...well, that’s rather bad for B, isn’t it? They have no say in the matter. And yes, in Donizetti’s script the ‘elixir’ is bogus, but nevertheless the intent is there, disturbing as it is. In the beginning, Adina is reading to the villagers the story of Tristan and Isolde, which first plants the idea of a love potion in Nemorino’s mind. Pity she didn’t finish the story, though: he might have benefited from knowing how it ends. Add to that Adina’s willful game-playing with her suitors, the quack Dr selling fake remedies to people, presumably including people with serious medical conditions, and the village women who flock to Nemorino when they hear his rich uncle dies, and you get a story in which no one really comes out well.

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The Bel Canto school can be very pleasant in the right hands, and it must be said the singers at Saturday night's performance were quite able. Reinhardt is a good, strong lyric tenor who brings rather more characterization to his role than you generally see; one wishes he were the rule and not the exception. Biller has an excellent voice just made for Bel Canto, even if she is not overly dramatic. Madore sings Belcore all right, but his performance really needs to be reigned in. Fortunately, Carfizzi manages to hit the sweet spot on his character, nicely counterpointing Reinhardt--the times when they share the stage are easily the highlights of the evening.

The resetting of the tale in middle America was just tailor-made for some custom set work, and the Allen Moyer set reaches back to borrow amply from Grant Wood and our own Thomas Hart Benton. The use of period vehicles was an unexpected but well-received extra (as a nod to Donizetti's original setting, Dulcamara's vehicle is painted in the colors of the Italian flag), and the wardrobe, lighting, etc, are all very well done, aptly reproducing the Anytown U.S.A. feel of the setting.

Story aside, "Elixir" is an enjoyable opera to look at and listen to, a two-acter which should be digestible for even the most desultory viewer. Think of it as an operatic snack. Not particularly filling, or necessarily the most substantial of fare, but quick and agreeable and easy to consume and move on. And really, that's all it tries to be.