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## The Cursed Clown Returns: Seattle Opera's *Rigoletto*



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Rigoletto (Marco Vratogna) at work in the court; photo by Elise Bakketun

It's no surprise that general director Speight Jenkins opted to reprise Seattle Opera's production of *Rigoletto* (<http://seattleopera.org/tickets/production.aspx?productionID=153>), staged by the American director Linda Brovsky, for his farewell season (which also coincides with the company's 50th anniversary). Introduced a decade ago, this *Rigoletto* is of fine vintage and remains hands-down the most satisfying Verdi production I've seen at Seattle Opera (a close tie being the *Falstaff* directed by Peter Kazaras).

Seattle can hardly be called a Mecca for *Regie* opera in the usual sense in which that term is bandied about. But that doesn't mean it's a haven for boringly conservative "traditional" stagings. The company actually *is* director-centric in that it places a high premium on theatrical values: it prizes directors who can contribute a sensitively close reading so that musical *and* dramatic meanings enhance each other. (Jenkins is, after all, a Wagnerian, and a good deal of the success of Seattle's *Ring* has hinged on director Stephen Wadsworth's ability to do just that.)

*Rigoletto* is certainly an opera amenable to directorial transposition, and the concept applied by Brovsky and the design team is to set the swiftly moving plot in the lurid "court" of a Benito Mussolini-like *duce* in the 1930s, at the height of Italian fascism. Rigoletto serves as a kind of spy who can feed him information and of course also as his procurer. The decadence of the *duce*/Duke of Mantua and his cronies turns out to be an expression of their unchecked power — the way they "loosen up" when not arrogantly terrorizing the citizens into submission.



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l to r: Marco Vratogna (Rigoletto), Nadine Sierra (Gilda), Sarah Larsen (Maddalena), Francesco Demuro (Duke of Mantua); photo by Elise Bakketun

Robert Dahlstrom's sets and Thomas C. Hase's lighting dramatically contrast the two poles of *Rigoletto*'s world. The palace, thrumming with lust, is sleekly decked out with the spoils of art (a version of Bernini's *Rape of Proserpina* sculpture serves as a prop littered with dirty champagne glasses), while the dimly lit, claustrophobic backstreets where the jester lives with his daughter Gilda are creeping with menace, an underworld that mirrors the cynical brutality of the rulers — only without their stylish veneer and classical trappings. The scenery of the last act, with its storm-swept cityscape across a river, is especially evocative. Marie Anne Chiment's elegant gowns and chic suits make exceptionally eye-catching costumes.

All this provides more than a mere backdrop against which the familiar melodrama plays out. By anchoring what otherwise might seem a far-fetched series of unfortunate coincidences in a repulsive political and moral order, the fascist setting pushes buttons. When the nobleman Monterone reproaches the Duke for "seducing" his daughter — it's clear that she's been traumatized — Brovsky

shows the old man wearing a yarmulke and dragged off to prison on the Duke's orders: a voice of protest silenced by anti-Semitic thuggery. (Could this explain the family secrets Rigoletto keeps hidden from Gilda, including the mystery of her mother?)

Rigoletto will find himself in the same position as Monterone when he mourns the ruin of Gilda. The opera's denouement is fueled by the jester's plan for vengeance, his realistic version of the curse pronounced by Monterone. Marco Vratogna portrays an uncommonly sympathetic Rigoletto, making for a harrowing final scene. The problem is that he's essentially too "nice" for the production's milieu — particularly in the opera's opening scene, where Verdi shows his cynical persona at work. The less-than-imposing curse delivered by Donovan Singletary's Monterone should be the climactic focus of the scene, but the jester's reaction barely registers.

Vratogna's baritone admirably balances sturdiness and lyricism — it can be thrilling in a cabaletta wrap-up — but on opening night didn't display the variety of colors essential to making this character vivid. You need to experience Rigoletto's jabbing viciousness for his final sorrow to earn its full impact. Vratogna's pivotal second-act solo lacked the differentiated phrasing Verdi calls for when Rigoletto, accustomed to his role as a performer, at last gives vent to his rage but then quickly changes tack to plead for his daughter.



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Francesco Demuro as the playboy Duke; photo by Elise Bakketun

A similar drawback applies to Francesco Demuro's depiction of the Duke. A lyric tenor with a gorgeous command of legato, Demuro brings out the careless playboy side of the role quite convincingly. It's just that he's *too* suave, too effortlessly mellifluous to generate the effect of a feared, ruthless leader. In fact, the emotional depth Demuro gave to his richly sung "Ella fu mi rapita!" scene (the Duke's most interesting solo and the one eclipsed by the popularity of his other two famous numbers) ends up jarring against the rest of his characterization. The Duke's moment of interiority of course goes nowhere — and that's one dramaturgical lapse Brovsky's smart production doesn't solve.

On the other hand, the really, really dark side of this *Rigoletto* is supplied in spades by Andrea Silvestrelli as the assassin-for-hire Sparafucile. His bass sounds as fathomless as an unlit, echoing cave, and Silvestrelli telegraphs noirish menace with just a flick and boot crush of his cigarette. As his

sister and partner-in-crime Maddalena, Sarah Larsen channels a touch of Carmen, working out an entire character transformation in the course of her one scene.



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Andrea Silvestrelli (Sparafucile); photo by Elise Bakketun

But no one else matched the art of transition displayed by American soprano Nadine Sierra, making her Seattle Opera debut as Gilda. It's not hard to discern what wowed the judges when they chose her as the youngest-ever winner of the Metropolitan Opera National Councils a few years ago. Sierra — and you'll most definitely want to pay attention to her name — has an alluring, immediately identifiable voice that encompasses dark-hued deep notes as well as spectacularly spun, floating light notes at the very top of her range.

And that's only a starting point for Sierra: her remarkable control allows her to venture an exciting variety in her phrasing. Her characterization complements this vocal richness: Sierra shows Gilda not as the innocent "tabula rasa" we usually see at first but as a loving daughter who already has desires of her own. The pain of her humiliation in the second act is so palpable it's hard to watch. And her Gilda's persistent attachment to the Duke isn't a sentimental weakness but a desperate attempt to salvage some kind of meaning within the opera's heartless environment. An especially effective touch is the shudder of terror she reveals even after she's resolved to sacrifice herself.



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Nadine Sierra; photo by Elise Bakketun

Another indispensable contribution is made by conductor Riccardo Frizza, doing the best work I've heard from him. The orchestra itself wasn't on quite the same level on opening night, and some sloppy intonation crept into the mix, but the musicians are clearly responsive to the conductor's reading of the score. Frizza understands that these immortal melodies get their punch precisely from the contexts Verdi creates. As a milestone experiment on the way toward the mature Verdi, *Rigoletto* is all about restyling the conventions of Italian opera within a context of breathless, dramatically compelling momentum.

Frizza was able to stretch a phrase here and there, effortlessly accommodating the singers, but all the while maintaining the needed tension. He also has a terrific ear for the telling, sometimes ironic details Verdi uses to punctuate the lyrical flow. The first scene especially benefited from a snarling energy that supplied in sound what the staging meant to evoke. The chorus (prepared by John Keene) also used details to excellent effect in the two palace scenes, hinting at a whole spectrum of implicit back stories for the audience's imagination to supply.

One especially memorable detail from Brossky: her treatment of "La donna è mobile," the opera's most-famous (and ironic) number, as a kind of prop. Here it's a pop hit that obviously gets a lot of play on the state radio. We hear it (i.e., the orchestra's preliminaries) as the Duke tunes in the radio while he's out slumming for sex, prompting him to sing it himself. It's when Rigoletto hears the Duke's version again, after his presumed stabbing, that the corpse's identity becomes a chilling question.

Brossky's conceit is right in keeping with Verdi's own "high concept" interpolation of the tune, which refuses the expected cadence but has the melody fade away. Verdi begins the tune with a false start, and it never really ends — the Duke is left unscathed, ready for his next conquest, leaving us

with a catchy tune. Fascism, as Walter Benjamin famously pointed out, is the “aestheticization of politics.”

Seattle Opera's production of *Rigoletto* runs through January 25. Tickets available [here](http://seattleopera.org/tickets/production.aspx?productionID=153) (<http://seattleopera.org/tickets/production.aspx?productionID=153>).

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