

# 'Cosi' fun, but lacks spark

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Mozart's timeless comedy "Cosi fan tutte" had a new spin in Cincinnati Opera's production that opened Thursday in Music Hall. In the end, where Mozart and da Ponte leave the viewer hanging, director Alain Gauthier had us believe it was all an act – as the "actors" posed for photographers with their Oscars.

To have the lovers air kiss and part ways at the end of this "Cosi fan tutte" made perfect sense, given that the production, which came from Seattle Opera, takes place on a 1930s movie set. But for some, this summation may have seemed an artificial solution to the centuries-old enigma that this opera presents.

The premise is that an old bachelor, Don Alfonso, bets two young officers, Ferrando and Guglielmo, that their fiancées, Dorabella and Fiordiligi, won't remain faithful to them for a day in their lovers' absence. The men pretend to be called into active duty, but return disguised as Albanians and each tries to seduce the other's fiancée.

The singers were first-rate in this entertaining – if sometimes slow – production. Stefan Lano led the Cincinnati Symphony Orchestra with nuance, but a lack of forward momentum and spontaneity contributed to the feeling that a spark was missing.

The updated movie theme allowed for some clever touches. The overture was played to projected "movie credits," announcing that Don Alfonso (William Shimell) was the director. He had a director's chair, the chorus wore black tuxedos and the notary (Despina in disguise) was a Groucho Marx look-alike.

The simple, attractive set design by Robert Dahlstrom included a circular terrazzo floor with tall windows and low walls, against a serene backdrop of hills and bay. **Moods changed via stunning "Technicolor" lighting design by Thomas C. Hase.**

The most over-the-top, Ziegfeld Follies moment was Ferrando and Guglielmo's Act II duet, "Secondate, aurette amiche" (Oh friendly breezes, help me) with the chorus encircling the two men in a lavish (and quite funny) choreography of turkey feather fans. It earned belly laughs from the crowd of 2,532.

With this cast, the singing made you smile, too. As Fiordiligi, Alexandra Deshorties' coloratura showpiece, "Come scoglio" glinted and sparkled like the two shiny pistols she wielded. She grew emotionally as the evening progressed, showing genuine depth of feeling in her Act II aria, "Per pietà."

Mezzo-soprano Marianna Pizzolato complemented well as her sister, Dorabella. Displaying a luscious voice, her view was passionate and sexy, more Carmen than innocent flirt. She fairly threw herself at Guglielmo and, after their passion was consummated, blew cigar smoke into her sister's face.

The men, Shawn Mathey (Ferrando) and Teddy Tahu Rhodes (Guglielmo) were also strong. Mathey projected a ringing tenor and Tahu Rhodes, whose 2004 Don Giovanni made an indelible impression, charmed with his flexible baritone and rakish presence. They were hilarious as the foreigners, dressed in long hair, Turkish robes and curled-up shoes.

Shimell made a blustery Don Alfonso, who propelled the drama wonderfully, projected a vibrant baritone and dominated each scene in which he appeared.

Unfortunately, when he wasn't there, the staging sagged. As Despina the maid, Nathalie Paulin sang delightfully, but her vivaciousness wasn't enough to keep the drama energized.

Musically, though, the ensembles were a joy. The Act I trio with the sisters and Don Alfonso, "Soave sia il vento" (May the breezes blow gently) was a gorgeous moment in which time stood still. The Act II wedding toast, revealing the personal thoughts of each lover, was another amazing Mozart quartet. The tuxedoed chorus, prepared by Henri Venanzi, made a lively addition and sang wonderfully all evening.

In the end, "Cosi fan tutte" can be profoundly moving. This one was merely entertaining.

The opera repeats at 8 p.m. today in Music Hall. Tickets: 513-241-2742.