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REVIEW

An Exciting, Shocking 'Rigoletto'

Monday, January 13, 2014 | by PHILIPPA KIRALY



Depraved, debauched, dangerous: that's the court of Rigoletto's patron in the opera of that title playing at McCaw Hall for the next two weeks. The first act is so strong in that respect you are left cringing and revulsed, yet the story is so compelling, Verdi's music so gorgeous, you stay in your seat to see what happens next.

What happens next is a second act even stronger, but this one brings sorrow and grief with it. These emotions, along with lust, love and revenge, carry you through the third act to the end of Verdi's masterpiece.

Stage director Linda Brovsky first conceived of setting this opera forward in time to Mussolini's Italy when she directed it here in 2004. It fits like a glove, and those army uniforms will send chills to anyone for whom that era is not far away. The production has since traveled

elsewhere under her direction and she has brought it back essentially the same with details refined and sharpened. Little acts of gratuitous cruelty are almost asides to the action, yet leave an indelible impression.

Seattle Opera has assembled a strong cast with Marco Vratogna as the humpbacked jester Rigoletto, Francesco Demuro as the lecherous Duke of Mantua, and Nadine Sierra as Rigoletto's beautiful daughter Gilda on Saturday's opening night—with Hyung Yun taking over Rigoletto and Jennifer Zetlan singing Gilda on Sunday afternoon. Rolando Sanz should have been the Duke on Sunday but, presumably not well, was replaced by Demuro, who sang it for the second time in under 24 hours with the same strength he had earlier.

With his rich baritone, Vratogna's expressively sung jester wears his twisted hump lightly—a bitter, malicious man at the court, but outside in street clothes he's just a father desperate to see his daughter safe from the Duke and his friends. When he fails, Vratogna appears a broken man, years older, though still with the ability to wreak vengeance.

Yun, new to the role, is more noticeably deformed in his movements. Where Vratogna

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inhabits the role, Yun had not quite reached his potential as actor Sunday, but the promise is there. However, his singing is superb, with all the emotion in his voice, as when you hear it cracking in grief at the end.

Both Sierra and Zetlan make fine Gildas, with girlishly light voices and the technique to sing the highest notes and roulades while lying flat on their backs, a remarkable feat. Sierra's Gilda seems a little older than Zetlan's, maybe 18 to Zetlan's 15, in their portrayal of an innocent, sheltered girl.

Nowadays when the appearance of the singers and their acting have become as important as their voices, it's a pleasure to see a Duke who looks the "handsome young man" described by Gilda. Demuro has the high tenor essential for the role and he sings it splendidly, but he can also run up and down stairs, and leap onto a table, a feat many of the great tenors of the past could never do.

Having the singers look right adds icing to the cake of Verdi's magnificent music and hummable melodies sung exceedingly well. The singing and acting were uniformly good throughout the cast, not just the principals. Notable among the other roles was Andrea Silvestrelli as the menacing murderer-for hire Sparafucile. His low bass, offering his services to Rigoletto, could send chills down the back, while Sarah Larsen, singing seductively as his tarty sister Maddalena, drew in the victims.

The memorable last set, of Sparafucile's domicile with a view across the river to distant parts of the city, is enhanced by a furious storm of thunder, lightning and rain (however did they do the rain?) much like we had outside the theater that day. Robert Dahlstrom created the sets, Thomas C. Hase did the lighting, Marie Anne Chiment designed the costumes. The whole is knit together admirably by conductor Riccardo Frizza. It's a great show.

Marco Vratogna as Rigoletto and Nadine Sierra as Gilda. Photo by Elise Bakketun.

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