

Prima Donna

Diva act delivers - Rufus Wainwright's debut opera scores and never bores
BY GLENN SUMI

Beautiful singing. Cranked-up passions. A touch of melodrama. If this isn't the stuff of opera, what is? Rufus Wainwright's *Prima Donna* delivers all of these with varying degrees of success. It's a worthy, if not entirely original, debut from the singer/songwriter.

Wainwright's affection for the art form is obvious throughout, from the Mascagni-meets-Puccini overture to the story's slender narrative, about a Callas-like diva named Régine Saint Laurent (Janis Kelly) who six years earlier mysteriously lost her voice.

Holed up in a Paris apartment that's seen better days, Régine's attended by a stern butler, Philippe (Gregory Dahl), and a new maid, Marie (Charlotte Ellett). When young journalist André (Colin Ainsworth) comes to interview her on Bastille Day, before you can say "Norman Desmond" she's contemplating a new romance as well as a comeback.

The characters, especially the men, aren't particularly rounded in the libretto (which is sung in French). But Wainwright shows us much about them through the music, using lush, romantic harmonies for his heroine and bombastic brass and percussion for the mysterious Philippe.

The singers are good, especially Ellett, who sings a lovely aria in the second act comparing her life in Paris to her home in Picardie, and Ainsworth, whose light tenor communicates youthful ardour and insensitivity.

Kelly is very watchable as the aging singer who, like Tosca, has lived only for art. She's powerful in the opera's most daring scene, where she's momentarily transported back to her career's greatest highlight, and even better in the final moments, when Wainwright has her deliver a poignant and affecting swan song.

Tim Albery's production exudes faded elegance, **helped by Thomas Hase's burnished lighting** and Antony McDonald's set, which makes clever use of screens.

I'm pretty sure *Prima Donna* won't be Wainwright's last opera. ☐

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