

Touring Company of "Rigoletto" Shines at Adler Theatre

Written by Patricia Baugh-Riechers
Tuesday, 21 October 2003 18:00

When the censors of Venice read the first libretto of the opera *Rigoletto*, they felt that the story was dangerous, shocking, and unflattering to the King of France. The original libretto and the Victor Hugo play on which it was based featured historical figures, King Francis I of France and his jester, Tribuolet. Giuseppe Verdi, who wrote the score, and Francesco Maria Piave, who wrote the libretto, made changes. The King was changed to a Duke, the setting from France to Italy, and the name of the jester to Rigoletto. The censors were satisfied, and the opera was first performed in Venice on March 11, 1851.

The Adler Theatre was the setting for Opera Verdi Europa's production of this magnificent drama on Sunday, October 19. This presentation, overall, was excellent, and I had been skeptical, as the quality of touring companies varies. In this case, I was most pleasantly surprised.

The story is a tragic one. The Duke of Mantua is Rigoletto's employer. The father of a married woman the Duke is romancing comes to admonish the Duke for his behavior. Rigoletto makes sport of the visitor, and the father, Count Monterone, curses him.

The Duke's courtiers decide to abduct the woman that they believe to be Rigoletto's lover as a joke. She is, in fact, his daughter, Gilda. She is romanced by the Duke, in disguise as a poor student.

Rigoletto comes home to her and tells her to never leave the house or the church because of the father's curse. In the dark of the night, the courtiers successfully kidnap his daughter, and Rigoletto goes to the castle to find her. Learning that she is his daughter, they allow her to come to him. She tells him she is in love with a young student who Rigoletto knows is the Duke. Rigoletto vows revenge and engages an assassin to kill the Duke. But the plot gets tangled up by love and sacrifice, with tragic consequences for Rigoletto.

Orlin Goranov in the tenor role of the Duke of Mantua possessed an outstanding voice. His aria "Questo O Quella" in the first act was quite beautiful. In Act Three the Duke sings the most well-known piece in the opera, "La Donne E' Mobile" (Women Are Fickle). Unfortunately, the tempo was a bit brisk and Goranov's voice seemed tired. Anna Veleva as Gilda was lovely and sang the part well. Her "Caro Nome," another well-known aria, was splendid. Diman Panchev possessed a marvelous bass voice and cut a domineering figure as the assassin.

But unquestionably, the greatest delight of the evening was baritone Alexander Krounev as the tragic jester Rigoletto. His voice had timbres that ranged from velvet soft to forged steel. The lyric duets with Veleva were breathtaking as were each of his arias, especially his second-act "Pari Siamo!" This reviewer was deeply touched by the great soliloquy cursing his fate. I have seen *Rigoletto* several times, including at the Metropolitan Opera in New York, and I can easily say that his Rigoletto was the most moving and incredibly beautifully sung performance I have attended.

The conductor, Nayden Todorov, did excellent work with the orchestra and the cast. In spite of this, the Rigoletto Quartet in Act Three was not together. Much to my surprise, the strings were electronically enhanced and entirely too loud at times.

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The sets were simple but effective. I was bothered by two other small things in the production, however. In the first scene, the women were wearing hoop skirts that were absolutely lovely. Unfortunately, when they picked up their skirts to move they were not wearing the undergarments of the period. I felt that if they went to all the trouble to make those beautiful costumes, they should have completed them. My other complaint concerned the staging, especially of the men's chorus. Most of the time, they stood in a semi-circle and occasionally half gestured with their arms. This static staging really bothered me. Otherwise, the production was well done and deserved the standing ovation that it received.

Many kudos to City Opera Company of the Quad Cities for bringing this marvelous company to the Quad Cities. Those of you who didn't attend missed something wonderful. Those of us who did were enchanted and touched by the performance. If you are put off by opera, I challenge you to attend at least one of the functions that the City Opera is sponsoring this season. The supertitles suspended above the stage kept everyone involved as they translated the Italian, so anyone could understand what was happening. Opera is the most spectacular blend of the arts conceived by mankind. Once you are hooked on it, your life is enriched. Even though the crowd was small, it was enthusiastic and appreciative of the performance. *Bravi tutti!*