

The Dallas Opera's Rigoletto: Practically perfect production sparkles, delights

Written by By TERRY MATHEWS, News-Telegram Arts Editor
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Maybe it's the glorious new venue. Maybe it's the chemistry between the singers. Maybe it's the debut of Dallas' own Laura Claycomb. Whatever it is, the Dallas Opera needs to bottle it – because it works.

Their presentation of Giuseppe Verdi's "Rigoletto" is practically perfect. Considering the quality of operas presented since the Margot and Bill Winspear Opera House opened in 2009, the company should give themselves a serious pat on the back.

First, there's the venue. Everything about it is special, from its sleek, modern design to its warm, inviting interior, reminiscent of European opera houses. And then there's the hall's stunning acoustics. Every note, whether sung by the cast or played by the brilliant TDO orchestra, is heard.

(Having perfect acoustics is not always a blessing, however, as we discovered in act three of Sunday's matinee. As The Duke of Mantua (James Valenti) launched into "La donna e mobile," the opera's most famous aria, a woman behind us started to sing along.

Everyone noticed, as evidenced by the turning of heads in the lady's direction. I thought the man sitting to my right was going to have a seizure. Valenti probably heard her, too, as he was singing from stage left, directly in front of us.

Even with the unintended audience participation, the singers stood out – for all the right reasons.)

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Opera magazine defined Italian baritone Paolo Gavanelli as “the foremost Verdi baritone of his generation – arguably the only truly authentic representative of this apparently dying breed active today.”

Even though he's sung the title role in Verdi's most political opera over 200 times, Gavanelli brought both passion and pathos to the stage. He was equally believable as an embittered, disfigured court jester and as the tender, loving, over protective father of 16-year-old Gilda. Bravo.

Making her soaring Dallas Opera debut was home town soprano Laura Claycomb.

Her brief but beautiful duet, “E il sol dell'anima” (Love is the sunshine of the soul) with the Duke, posing as a poor student to woo her, is a perfect example of what happens when two beautiful human voices combine in a tender love song.

Her act one aria “Caro nome,” (Dearest Name) was spectacular. She floated over the music and exhibited complete control over difficult passages. She also conveyed a teenager's romantic reverie as she sighed, twirled, lounged on the stage. If this performance is any indication of the depth of her talent, Claycomb's career will be long and illustrious. Brava.

For this production, tenor James Valenti sheds the role of romantic leading man and morphs into a real rascal. He struts around the stage, showing off a fine physique, along with a serious set of vocal chords. He slips from rascal to tender lover and back again with apparent ease. Bravo.

Rock-solid performances by bass Raymond Aceto (Sparafucile), baritone Stephen Hartley (Marullo) and a brilliant turn by Kirstin Chavez (Maddalena) as a saloon girl who'll stop at nothing to get what she wants round out the exceptional cast.

Of equal note is the orchestra, led by Italian Peitro Rizzo, who made his Dallas debut in the 2009 production of “La Bohème.” He directed the musicians and singers with a subtle strength rarely found at the podium.

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The sum of all these shimmering parts makes "Rigoletto" one of the Dallas Opera's most successful productions in recent memory. Bravo.

Subsequent performances are scheduled for March 30, April 2, 7 and 10 (matinee), with single tickets starting at \$25. Call 214-443-1000 or go online at www.dallasopera.org. *****

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Here's a clip

of Valenti singing "La donna e mobile" - alone.