

James Valenti: Opera's answer to George Clooney

Written by By TERRY MATHEWS, News-Telegram Arts Editor
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There's a new hunk in town and the Dallas Opera has him. His name is James Valenti and he's making his Lone Star debut in the current production of Puccini's ***La bohème***, but he's not new to the role. The young tenor made his professional debut in 2003 at age 25 as Rodolfo in Rome and has sung the part at La Scalla, the New York City Opera, and with companies in Japan and Miami. **L**

a bohème

, Puccini's most produced opera, debuted in 1896, conducted by the great Arturo Toscani.

It tells the story of four struggling artists in 1830s Paris. Rodolfo is the poet of the group. Marcello is the painter; Colline is the philosopher; and Schaunard is the musician. None of them makes enough money to cover their rent, so they're always dodging the landlord. A frail seamstress named Mimi lives above the men in a room even smaller and colder than theirs.

As Rodolfo, Valenti cuts a tall, dark, and handsome figure on the stage, as any leading man should. Think George Clooney with a voice that can melt your heart.

What makes the New Jersey native stand out is his beautifully nuanced voice. Not only can he belt out an aria like *O soave fanciulla*; he can handle the delicate, quiet moments, too.

Judging from the warm ovations he received after every aria and during the extended curtain calls, the Dallas crowd appreciated Valenti's command of the role and affection for Puccini's music.

Valenti told Suzanne Calvin, the opera's associate director of marketing, media and press relations, in Playbill, "Puccini is master of melody and orchestrations, a master at being able to take a text and turn it into another world. ... It has a captivating quality and every time I do *Bohé me* ,

... it's such an honor to sing this music."

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When asked how it was to work with Valenti, Calvin said, "James is as nice, cooperative, good tempered and generous as he is a wonderfully talented singer. He even cooperated with a guy on our staff who shot a silly Valentine's Day video."



Whoever handled casting for Rodolfo's running buddies, Marcello, Colline and Schaunard is to be commended. The four of them made a merry band of ne'er-do-wells who scam their patrons and live – and starve – for their art.

Maria Kanyova stars as Mimi, Rodolfo's sweetheart. Kanyova looks the part of the poor seamstress who is stricken with a life-threatening illness. She's small - as anyone would be standing next to Valenti - but she has a large voice that matches his. Their duets at the end of Act I and Act III are the production's standouts.

The opera's orchestra provided the perfect interpretation of Puccini's sweeping score. Although he currently serves as the Chief Conductor at the Gothenberg Opera in Sweden, Pietro Rizzo earned his master of music in violin from Southern Methodist University. He will make his Metropolitan Opera debut later this year.

His popularity with the Dallas Opera's orchestra was evident in Sunday's matinee, as the musicians stomped the ground (their way of applauding) each time he entered the hall. His connection to the music, the musicians and the singers was tangible, as he gently guided them through the four acts.



The settings, costumes and lighting all played their part in creating the mood and the chorus was in fine voice during the café scene at the end of Act II.

The production's weak link is Musetta, Marcello's sweetheart and a woman who knows her way around. In this production, however, soprano Valentina Farcas is over her head.

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Musetta is supposed to be lusty, full of herself and quite the little minx. Farcas, however, seemed uncomfortable playing the vixen. She had trouble managing her fur stole, she got her foot tangled in a tablecloth during the café scene and then flashed just a little too much leg while trying to distract her date (Alcindoro) as she flirted with Marcello.

Her voice and delivery weren't near worldly enough to deliver the goods, leaving her big aria, *Quando me'n vo*, to fall flat – the show's only disappointing moment.

Sunday's performance was sold out, as was the buffet at the "M" room (formerly the Crystal Terrace), under new management, with a new look, beautiful and delicious food, and an impressive new attitude by the staff. * Editor's note: I was delighted to share lunch and the performance with Sarah Smith of Sulphur Springs, Rebecca Dodson of Saltillo and Tom Willison of Mount Vernon. Lovely company. Lovely lunch. Lovely performance. Hunky hero. Sunday afternoon doesn't get much better than that.

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The last performances of *La bohème* are Wednesday and Saturday at 7:30 p.m. Tickets are \$15 - \$275. Call 214-443-2000 for availability.

For dinner reservations at M, call 214-413-3940. Service begins at 5:45 p.m. and costs \$21.95.

Click to listen to "Che Gelida Manina" by James Valenti

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wsEfq9zv5kw>