

## 'The Kiss' charms at Opera Theatre of St. Louis



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And now for something completely different.

After the high drama and body counts (one dead soprano, two dead tenors, one brain-damaged baritone) of its immediate predecessors — “Il Tabarro,” “I Pagliacci” and “Champion” — at Opera Theatre of St. Louis, the sweetly lightweight nature of Smetana’s “The Kiss” comes as something of a relief. Opera does not live by tragedy alone.

The production, the fourth and last to open in OTSL’s 38th season, originated at Ireland’s Wexford Festival in 2010; it’s part of the occasional exchange between the two companies. On Sunday night at the Browning Theatre, “The Kiss,” subtitled “A Folk Opera in Two Acts,” proved as charming as promised.

The premise is simple: Czech villagers Vendulka and Lukas were childhood sweethearts, but his parents insisted that he marry another. His parents have died, and now his wife is dead, too, leaving him with an infant to care for, but with the freedom to remarry as he likes.

Although Vendulka’s blustery father says that it’s a bad idea, the betrothal proceeds — until Lukas leans in for a kiss, and Vendulka says no, not until they’re married. Sure enough, there’s a quarrel, and a scene. They both learn something, and Lukas apologizes in front of the entire village.

One of the best reasons to see “The Kiss” is for soprano Corinne Winters’ spectacular turn as Vendulka. Winters has been at OTSL every year for the past five seasons, the first two as a Gerdine Young Artist, and in principal roles ever since. She’s now singing in major houses around the world, and her performance on Sunday night demonstrated why. The voice is rich, lovely and flexible; she’s beautiful and moves well; and her dramatic skills are so strong that she made Vendulka’s actions seem entirely reasonable.

Her Lukas was Garrett Sorenson, a tall, sturdy tenor with a big, beautiful voice. The pair had good chemistry, dramatically and vocally; he was sympathetic, even when he turned up drunk with a set of village girls, and he extracted all the story’s humor to good effect.

Another former Gerdine Young Artist worth watching is Matthew Worth, in the role of Lukas’ brother-in-law. The possessor of a dark, gorgeous baritone, he’s handsome and believable as well. As Vendulka’s aunt Martinka, a tough smuggler who knows her way around the forest, Elizabeth Batton was down-to-earth and funny.

Although he was billed as “an old smuggler,” bass-baritone Charles Z. Owen, a current Gerdine Young Artist, is young and good-looking, with an impressive instrument. Matthew Burns did what he could with the role of Paloucky Otec, Vendulka’s cranky father, who gets around with a wheelchair and the aid of a pair of long-suffering nurses. Still, I was relieved when one of them finally bopped him on the head with his cane and shut him up.

Emily Duncan-Brown was charming as Barce, the servant. Robert Ainsley’s chorus was, as always, spot-on. In his conducting debut, Anthony Barrese brought out all the Slavic beauty of Smetana’s score and supported his singers admirably.

Stage director Michael Gieleta kept things light and moving fast, with sight gags and clever twists that made the most of the story. The most attractive feature of James Macnamara’s simple set was a movable wall made up of natural-looking wooden strips; a conveyor belt in the floor proved useful. Fabio Toblini’s authentic Czech costumes added to the charm; Christopher Akerlind’s lighting designs were subtle and enhanced the drama. {&rule}“The Kiss” (Hubička)

By Bedrich Smetana and Eliska Krásnohorská

8 p.m. June 20, 22, 26, 28

Opera Theatre of St. Louis, Loretto-Hilton Center, 130 Edgar Road

\$25 to \$128

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