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An Unlikely Double Bill Succeeds in Santa Fe

Paul DuQuenoy, *MusicalAmerica.com*

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SANTA FE—Moving away from the high drama of its 2014 season, the lighter side of Santa Fe Opera's season delivered laudable new productions of comedic classics. Perhaps the high point was Donizetti's rollicking comedy *Don Pasquale* (seen Aug. 13), the story of an old man who tries to do his lazy nephew Ernesto out of an inheritance by taking a much younger wife. His friend Dr. Malatesta ("Dr. Headache") contrives to make a fool of him by setting up a marriage to the nephew's sweetheart, Norina. She turns out to be such a harridan that Don Pasquale happily relinquishes her to his nephew with a generous allowance.

Known among other productions for his popular and well-travelled *La Fille du Regiment*, director Laurent Pelly tends toward stylization. Here Don Pasquale's home is reduced to a bare room decorated only with an easy chair and large chandelier. In Act II, when Norina has turned his life upside down, the room itself is made to appear upside down, with the chandelier protruding from the floor and the easy chair suspended from the ceiling. The simplicity of the effect draws out the comic story in attractive relief.

The title role fell to gifted British baritone Andrew Shore, who took the character on an emotional rollercoaster. Along with young baritone Zachary Nelson as Malatesta, the comic duo reveled in the farce. It was difficult to take one's eyes off beautiful Santa Fe veteran Brenda Rae, whose developing soprano scaled the heights of Norina's music with verve and excitement. The sweet-voiced tenor Alek Shrader contributed a dramatically dynamic Ernesto, though the cadenza ascents were often underpowered and unfortunate. Corrado Rovaris's conducting sounded a little too brassy, but his rapid pace set the right comedic tone.

Comedy also ruled the day in Santa Fe's unusual pairing of Mozart's *L'Impresario* with Stravinsky's *Le Rossignol* (seen Aug. 15). The first is a farce about a desperate director who has to balance the tempers of two prima donnas in order to stage a production (originally a play) that will save his company. In the end the two ladies are persuaded to set aside their differences in the name of art. Since this story is timeless to anyone familiar with the arts behind the scenes, it is readily adaptable to almost any time or cultural milieu and usually updated to contemporary or near-contemporary settings. Michael Gieleta's production advances the action to Paris in the 1920s and turns the company into the famed Ballets Russes, which, despite its name, also performed a great deal of opera in its European tours in the first decades of the 20th century. The company director, here a Russian named Yuri Yussupovich, looks and acts much like the Ballets Russes' real life impresario, Sergei Diaghilev.

As the overture plays, we see pantomimes of singers performing scenes from Puccini's *Tosca*, Richard Strauss's *Salome* (on the Santa Fe program next year), and other favorites. Finally, the company's patron-- a Russian countess--is executed by nasty Bolsheviks, thus creating its financial predicament. The prima donna rivalry falls between sopranos from Italy and Transylvania, who compete over the title role and, needless to say, the attendant salaries.

When they overcome their egos, they perform together in--you guessed it--*Le Rossignol*.

Stravinsky's opera holds a special place in Santa Fe. The composer himself conducted it here during celebrations honoring his 80th birthday, in 1962. This production's conceit--that the performance is given by Yuri Yussupovich's company--recalls the "opera within an opera" effect of Strauss's *Ariadne auf Naxos*, in which an assortment of artists must come together in a long prologue to put on a performance, which occurs in the act that follows. Accordingly, the impresario's office morphs into *Le Rossignol's* Chinese surroundings, in which an emperor spurns a generous live nightingale and its soothing songs in favor of a flashier mechanical nightingale received as a gift from foreign ambassadors. When the Emperor is sick and dying, the live nightingale returns out of compassion to console him.

The concept of this unusual double bill was not immediately apparent, but once it unfolded on stage, its genius was there to behold. Baritone Anthony Michaels-Moore delivered a fine performance, alternating in the roles of the impresario and the Emperor. Brenda Rae's triumph in *Don Pasquale* led easily to her commanding interpretation of one of the overbearing sopranos, who must conquer her dismay to be cast in the lesser role of the Cook in *Le Rossignol*. The role of her competitor, who then plays the Nightingale, went to the airy soubrette Erin Morley, who has captured much attention recently. Mezzo-soprano Meredith Arwady alternated comic talents with fatal gravitas in her performances as Madame Krone and Death in the respective operas. Kenneth Montgomery led the orchestra in an inspiring performance that managed to harmonize these very different works.

Pictured: Brenda Rae as Vlada Vladimirescu in *L'Impresario*.

Paul DuQuenoy's review of Dr. Sun Yat-sen, receiving its world premiere in Santa Fe, will appear on Monday.

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