



The Beautiful Lies of the Poets: Opera Theatre's "La rondine"

By Raphael Maurice

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CORINNE WINTERS AS MAGDA AND ANTHONY KALIL AS RUGGERO IN OPERA THEATRE OF SAINT LOUIS' 2015 PRODUCTION OF "LA RONDINE."
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Saturday night's performance of Opera Theatre St. Louis' *La rondine*, which first premiered in 1917 at the Monte Carlo Opera House, was beautiful and brilliant. Puccini's eighth opera gives us a glimpse into Parisian society around 1850, and brings to mind a great warning given long ago: Don't trust the poets. That was essentially Plato's position when he was making his theoretical Republic, a bit of advice that might have profited Magda, played in this production by the hyper-talented Corinne Winters. It is the poet Prunier who first, through a song and then a palm reading, reawakens that terrible flame within Magda. The poet "talks" of love being in the air, and Magda begins to recall her own first love and chases what ultimately will lead to the more tragic side of *La rondine*.

Magda reluctantly lives in the house of Rambaldo (played excellently by Matthew Burns) in a tedious and ultimately pragmatic arrangement. Rambaldo has little time for Prunier's little songs about love; he is an earner, and sees to it that Magda has each and every trinket she might desire. To put it plainly, he has heeded every warning given about poets and the lies they can tell, the damnation that potentially comes singing from their tongues. The wild air around turn-of-the-century Paris is entirely lost on Rambaldo. Within the first act, we see the figure of Ruggero (played by Anthony Kalil) enter the house, waiting with letters of introduction to Rambaldo. And with their meeting, the master of the house, the financier and pragmatist has sealed his own fate, so to speak, and is about to lose his rather flimsy grip on Magda. By the second act—my personal favorite of the three—she has transformed herself and enters a brilliantly lighted bar to meet up with Ruggero.

Within the second act of *La rondine*, I sensed the atmosphere of Renoir's *Luncheon of the Boating Party*. The actors and actresses, along with the wonderful set-design, saw to it that the stage became something able to transport the audience to another place and time. Nostalgia settled in for me, but I couldn't quite know what it was I was missing. That's the seductive force of *La rondine*. When Corinne Winters and Anthony Kalil sang together and began to fall in love, I started to succumb to memories of my own, memories probably best kept under lock and key. Numerous lines of poets seemed to crop up in my mind, and I wanted their lies to vanish. The second act concluded with Rambaldo discovering the two lovers and agreeing to vanish himself. His house and money were not enough to keep Magda in her place. But capital-L love turned out not to be enough to support her either.

The third act occurs on a beachside hotel near Nice. The nascent and ever-present unrest in Magda begins to riot. *La rondine* (the swallow) is like the proverbial rolling stone that gathers no moss. In the voice and presence of Corinne Winters, this restlessness and agony is nearly palpable. I cannot praise her performance enough. She departs in the last act after Prunier (played by the astonishing John McVeigh) reenters with Lisette, a former maid to Magda in her old home and world. The bills have stacked up with Ruggero, and Magda is determined to continue on her own path, regardless of the consequences. She abandons him and disappears into the place "where the sky meets the sea," as Rimbaud put it. Those terrible poets, those imitators, have misled us all at some point.

La rondine has been my favorite performance yet at Opera Theatre St. Louis. The orchestra and arrangements were stunning. I left the theater with a slight lump in my throat, a bodily reminder that pathos had overcome me, as I assume it had with the rest of the audience.

On the drive home, I recalled a scene from one of the dialogues of Plato, when Socrates, rejecter of the poets, sits in his cell waiting to drink hemlock and die. Socrates is writing imitations of poets, retelling myths, returning back to the very things he refused to allow into the just city. I hadn't really thought of my own first love, a girl who lent me the dialogues when I was also kept, kept in detention hall after high school. If you are in the market for beauty, the sort that might churn up dormant scenes, go and witness *La rondine*. In three acts that go by in a blaze, you might find yourself, like Magda, prepared to hear lies being beautifully sung. You might be overcome by Puccini's power and the wonderfully staged performance at Opera Theatre St. Louis. Try to keep it to yourself if you can. I doubt it.

La rondine runs through June 28 at the Loretto-Hilton Center (130 Edgar). Tickets are \$25–\$129, and can be purchased online, or by calling the box office at 314-961-0171. For more information about Opera Theatre of St. Louis, visit opera-stl.org.

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