

STUDENTS SHINE IN MASSENET'S 'MANON'

CAPE TIMES

7 NOV '07

Stylish stars rise above mishaps

CAPE TOWN OPERA AND UCT OPERA SCHOOL, Opera House; Massenet: *Manon*. Directed by Michael Gieletawith, with Musa Spelman, Mlamli Lalapantsi, Sunnyboy Dladla, Amos Nomnabo, Bulelani Madondile, Njabulo Mthinkulu, Runette Botha, Amanda Osorio, Carynne Wolff. Cape Philharmonic Orchestra and Opera School Chorus conducted by Chris Dowdeswell, designed by Michael Mitchell, lit by Kobus Rossouw. (Until Saturday.) **DEON IRISH** reviews.

IT'S BEEN a year of novelty for the UCT Opera School, with the first South African performance of Puccini's *La Rondine* and now this premiere of *Manon*.

British director Michael Gieleta has done a sterling job of cutting down a generous five-act original to a fairly lean three hours, including two intervals. The cuts have been cleverly effected, so as to occasion no appreciative loss of narrative or musical logic.

The design is simple, cunning and productive. On a revolving base is a four-sided structure, two opposite sides providing the facades and doors of, respectively, the first act's inn and the bed chamber of the second act. The other two open sides are credibly adapted as a pavilion at a fete, the interior of St Sulpice and the entrance portal of a gambling salon.

With a subtle lighting scheme



GIVING IT THEIR ALL: Students give a credible performance in the opera *Manon*.

and a variety of props, the staging takes on a surprisingly "full" feel in all but the church scene, where the very limitation of lighted area is suggestive of a vaster whole.

Costuming is equally attractive, although set somewhat later than the postulated date of 1721. But I don't think nuns showed ankles at any period of the *ancien regime*...

The opera's narrative ultimately calls into question Manon's status as heroine for, other than her dying confession, she comes across as hopelessly naive in the first two acts and a pretty heartless, indeed ruthless, beauty in the next two.

But, I suppose, her suffering and death in Act V make up for it all, although one wonders if Des

Grioux senior would see it that way.

Musically, the orchestra sounded less than inspired on Saturday night (I was unable to attend the opening).

Things started with an early entry by a sole flute at the start of the overture and that was the most obvious, rather than the only, lapse of ensemble. In general, however, the

problem was a certain lack of the lush romanticism the score demands. But plaudits go to the first horn for the big second act obbligato.

In the title role, Spelman started the evening very tense and it was not until the third act that she really began to enjoy herself, and therefore relax. The vocal improvement was apparent and she handled the taxing writing of the third act with conviction.

Opposite her, I liked Lalapantsi's engaging Des Grieux, his light tenor attaining a stylishly French character. The role is a real kaleidoscope, as he is a different character in each of the acts following the first two, and Lalapantsi deserves credit for maintaining dramatic credibility.

Dladla was a suitably comic (and ultimately dangerous) Guillot, Mthinkulu a solidly reliable De Bretigny and Nomnabo a suitably concerned cousin Lescaut. I also enjoyed the three actresses (Botha, Osorio and Wolff), who almost managed to keep their trio ensemble flawless.

The wealth of minor roles were delivered in fine style and there was little to criticise in contributions of the chorus, trained by Albert Horne. The French diction was good and one was reminded that it is, after all, the second language of Africa.

All in all, a fine student production.