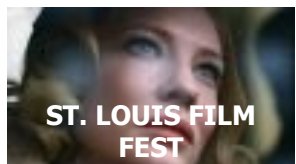




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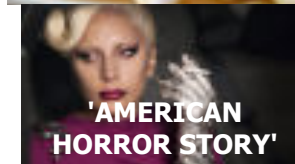
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Opera review: Soprano Corinne Winters makes 'La Rondine' a production to cherish at Opera Theatre

May 31, 2015 1:37 pm • By Sarah Bryan Miller

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Magda (Corinne Winters) and Ruggiero (Anthony Kalil) share a tender moment in Act III of Puccini's 'La Rondine' at Opera Theatre of St. Louis. (Photo by Ken Howard)

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FOR YOUR INFORMATION

Puccini's "La Rondine"

When • 8 p.m. June 1, 12 and 18; 1 p.m. June 20 and 24; 7 p.m. June 28
Where • Loretto-Hilton Center, Webster University, 130 Edgar Road (at Big Bend), Webster Groves
How much • \$25-\$134
More info: 314-961-0644 or ExperienceOpera.org

If your idea of a great night at the opera is a beautifully sung romantic tunefest with a heart-tugging story, then you really need to get to Opera Theatre of St. Louis for Giacomo Puccini's "La Rondine."

It's hard to understand why "Rondine" is so rarely performed, with its meltingly beautiful music. The story will seem familiar: Magda is a kept woman in Paris, with plenty of material things, but unhappy and longing for love. On a whim, she goes to a popular dance hall and falls in love with Ruggiero, a young student. She doesn't share her past, or even her real name.

They run away together; when he wants to take her home to his family, she realizes that she can't keep living a lie, returning to her protector in Paris.

It's a more grown-up take on the story of "La Traviata," with the tainted woman living instead of conveniently dying. Magda still suffers a life-altering tragedy, but she doesn't get out of it that easily. Lacking the dramatic punch of a "Traviata," it's still a solid evening's entertainment.

On Saturday night, OTSL music director Stephen Lord and an excellent cast made a strong case for it. That cast was headed by soprano Corinne Winters, a Lord discovery; she demonstrated why she's now in demand internationally. Her voice is gorgeous and intelligently used, with a flawless technique. Her serious dramatic chops are enhanced by her physical beauty and rightness for the roles she plays.

Winters' voice has darkened and matured since her last appearance in St. Louis, in 2013's "The Kiss." Here, as the titular swallow, Winters has a role more worthy of her abilities, complex and believable.

As Ruggero, tenor Anthony Kalil proved that he's the real deal, a young singer with a big future. From the moment he opened his mouth, he gave notice of a major talent. If he still needs some work with an acting coach (and, perhaps, a personal trainer), his voice, with its authentic Italianate ring and ping, made up for it and then some.

The secondary romantic couple is there primarily for comedic contrast. The role of Magda's maid Lisette is a thankless one; soprano Sydney Mancasola made her into much more than a foil, investing her with personality far beyond that provided by librettist Giuseppe Adami. Her singing and acting were both first-rate.

The famous poet Prunier — he's essentially Rodolfo from "La Boheme," 20 years older and leagues more insufferable — is Lisette's lover and sparring partner. Tenor John McVeigh gave him the right level of shallow cynicism and a fine voice, along with great comic timing. Magda's protector, Rambaldo, doesn't have much to do but rumble and grumble; bass-baritone Matthew Burns did a good job as the opera's de facto heavy.

All the soloists but Kalil are present or former members of the Gerdine Young Artists program, living testaments to its effectiveness in identifying and training some of the country's best young singers. Lord gave a reading of the score to cherish, leading all his musicians, from singers to instrumentalists, in a beautiful performance.

This production moves the action to 1914, when it was composed. The sets and costumes, by Alexander Dodge and Gregory Gale, were handsome and effective, with a clever device for the second act dance hall.

Michael Gieleta's direction was mostly effective, with good differentiation in the smaller roles. There were puzzlements, however: Why was one singer used as both the butler and the Majordomo? After a while, it seemed sinister to see the same distinctively tall servant everywhere Magda went. Why didn't Gieleta open up the dance floor a little, so that we could see the principals? And why, given the brevity of Puccini's opera, weren't Acts I and II combined? There's no reason for a 20-minute intermission after each half-hour act; a couple of minutes' pause for a quick change would have done it.

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Tags Opera Theatre Of St Louis, Otsl, Corinne Winters, Anthony Kalil, La Rondine, Sarah Bryan Miller

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