

07/08/2008

Glimmerglass Opera opens season with a racy 'Kiss Me, Kate'

By WAYNE MYERS, Dispatch Drama Critic



Photo: Cory Weaver. Lisa Vroman as Lilli/Kate in the Glimmerglass Opera production of Cole Porter's "Kiss Me, Kate."

It's backstage at Glimmerglass Opera, and the company is mounting a production of "The Shrew," an adaptation of Shakespeare's comedy "The Taming of the Shrew."

Fred and Lilli, divorced from each other for a year, reunite for the staging, with Fred in the Petruchio role and Lilli playing the volatile, unloved Kate—a role perfect for her own diva-like temperament.

That Fred and Lilli still love each other is very obvious as they reminisce about their young love in the stirring "Wunderbar" and ponder what went wrong.

When Lilli receives from Fred flowers that made up her wedding bouquet, it melts her heart and it seems the couple are on their way to a reconciliation.

But then she learns that the flowers were intended for tarty Lois Lane, whom Fred has cast as the production's Bianca. "Whatever thou say, Fred," Courtney Romano's tasty Lois coos with South Philly girl sweetness and pole dancer grace.

The escalating conflict spills onto the stage.

Lilli takes particular relish in singing Kate's number, "I Hate Men," as she displays an array of diabolical torture devices.

Dressed in flashy spandex leggings with a corset bodice and Elizabethan-inspired sleeves (a costuming coup from designer Anka Lupes), she sings that men are "to be kept like piggies in a pen."

It's all that the embattled Fred can do to contain Lilli's rage and finish "The Shrew" while dealing simultaneously with two literary gangsters, played by the engaging Michael Mott and Bradley Nacht, who have come to collect on a gambling I.O.U. forged with Fred's name.

It's a priceless moment when Fred, as Petruchio, sings of Kate's beauty as Lilli's backside wiggles in full view of the audience as she struggles to escape Fred's grasp.

The gangsters, meanwhile, take roles in "The Shrew" to ensure that Lilli won't bolt the show.

Porter thought he didn't have a feeling for Shakespeare.

He couldn't have been more wrong.

The "Bowery waltz" show-stopper "Brush Up Your Shakespeare," sung by the two stage-struck nameless gangsters, is as sweetly salacious as

COOPERSTOWN - The significance of what transpired at the Alice Busch Opera Theater last Saturday night was not lost on me. Glimmerglass Opera launched its Shakespeare-linked 2008 festival season with a musical—the first since the company's founding in 1975.

And so on this night Cole Porter joined the likes of Donizetti, Britten and Rossini in having his work staged at this Hugh Hardy-designed countryside opera house on the shore of Otsego Lake.

But I didn't dwell on that for too long.

I was too busy enjoying Diane Paulus' ribald staging of Porter's 1948 "Kiss Me, Kate."

Brad Little and Lisa Vroman, as the combative theatrical couple Fred Graham and Lilli Vanessi, delivered the first titanic performances of the Glimmerglass Opera summer.

And Glimmerglass Opera favorite soprano Sarah Coburn and mezzo-soprano Sandra Piques Eddy, who will open here later this month as Giulietta and Romeo in Bellini's "I Capuleti e i Montecchi," haven't even sung a note at this year's festival yet.

Little downplayed Fred's ego, making the character disarming and very attractive. When a blackout hits during the number "Another Op'nin', Another Show," Fred simply pulls out a flashlight and illuminates his face.

Vroman, a musical theater-opera crossover, made for an especially lyrical Lilli and was completely luscious and alluring when singing the minor key-set "So in Love."

Advertisement

A new driving force is in town!

searchNYcars.com

anything the Bard ever wrote.

But you wouldn't know that seeing the 1953 film adaptation with the excellent Keenan Wynn and James Whitmore as the Brooklynite hoods.

Among the brilliant "Brush Up Your Shakespeare" lyrics censored (and thereby draining much of the testosterone from the song) in that film were, "When your baby is pleading for pleasure/Let her sample your Measure for Measure"; "If she says she won't buy it or tike it/Make her tike it, what's more As You Like It!"; "Better mention 'The Merchant of Venice'/When her sweet pound o' flesh you would menace"; and the delightful "Just recite an occasional sonnet/And your lap'll have honey upon it."

(Inexplicably, the lyrics "If she says your behavior is heinous/Kick her right in the Coriolanus" were not cut from the film.)

As sung by Mott and Nacht, this (mostly) uncut Glimmerglass "Brush Up Your Shakespeare" was a production standout.

And perhaps no song or aria will better emphasize this summer John Conklin's abstract 1599 Globe Theatre set as a nexus between the Shakespeare of Elizabethan London and the modern age. The set will be adapted for each of the season's four productions. In "Kiss Me, Kate," the action moves between backstage at the Alice Busch and the onstage world of a cartoony, lime-green Padua.

Damian Norfleet as Paul took over the stage in the jazzy number "Too Darn Hot," which also featured a scorching solo by Robin Seletsky on clarinet.

Paulus, who for the Chicago Opera Theater directed the three 17th-century Claudio Monteverdi operas known to survive intact-"L'Orfeo," "Il Ritorno d'Ulisse" and "L'Incoronazione di Poppea"-and also directs the revival of "Hair" at the Delacorte Theater in Central Park for the Public Theater later this summer, has done terrific work in her Glimmerglass Opera directorial debut.

The production uses the original 1948 Robert Russell Bennett-Don Walker orchestration. While poring through Cole Porter-related material at the Cole Porter Trusts in Manhattan, Conductor David Charles Abell fortuitously discovered Porter's original ink "Kiss Me, Kate" manuscript. (According to associate conductor Dan Saunders, the staff didn't even know they had it.)

"Where is the Life That Late I Led?" showcased Porter's adaptation of classical Italian melodies to compose the number.

After the performance, Glimmerglass Opera General and Artistic Director Michael MacLeod cautioned not to read too much into the appearance of a musical in a Glimmerglass Opera season, noting that the 2009 season, which will include Verdi's "La Traviata," is straight opera.

* * *

"Kiss Me, Kate," a musical. Music and lyrics by Cole Porter and book by Bella and Sam Spewack. A Glimmerglass Opera production directed by Diane Paulus and conducted by David Charles Abell. Remaining performances: July 13(m), 24, 27(m), 31, Aug. 2(m), 4(m), 8, 11, 16, 19(m), and 23. In repertory with Handel's "Giulio Cesare in Egitto," Wagner's "Das Liebesverbot" and Bellini's "I Capuleti e i Montecchi." Tickets: (607) 547-2255 or www.glimmerglass.org.



©The Oneida Daily Dispatch 2008